君の膵臓をたべたい
住野よる
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I Want To Eat Your Pancreas

Yoru Sumino

The funeral of my classmate, Sakura Yamauchi, was held on a cloudy day that didn’t seem unfitting of her when she was alive.
As proof of the value of her life, many were covered in tears during the ritual, as well as last night’s wake - neither of which I attended. I stayed home the whole time.
Fortunately, the only classmate who would’ve forced me to attend had already left this world, and it wasn’t as if either our teacher or her parents had the right or the obligation to request my presence, so I was allowed to stand by my own decision.
Certainly, I, a high school student even without being acknowledged by anyone as such, was supposed to be attending school - but because she had died in the middle of a school vacation, I was able to avoid going out in the bad weather.
Since my parents who were both at work had left me an adequate lunch, I remained holed up in my own room. That these actions of mine were due to the loneliness and emptiness of losing a classmate - to say so would be inaccurate.
Unless I had been made to go out by that classmate of mine, I’d always been the type to spend my days off in my own room.
Within my room, I would most often be found reading books. More so than guidebooks and self-help books, I loved to read novels. I would read my paperbacks while rolling on top of my bed, resting either my head or my chin on a white pillow. As hardcovers were too heavy, I preferred paperbacks.
The book I was currently reading was something I had borrowed from her - the single magnum opus that had been encountered by a girl who didn’t read books. Its position on the bookshelf had not been disturbed since I borrowed it. Though I had planned to read and return it before she died, it was too late for that now.
Since nothing could be done about my tardiness, I made up my mind to return the book to her house after I was done with it. As I greeted her portrait - that would be a good time to return it.
By the time I had finished reading half the book, the evening had arrived. While using the fluorescent light that filtered through the closed curtains to see, I learned of how much time had passed from a single incoming phone call.
The phone call wasn’t anything special. It was from my mother.
Though I had ignored the first two calls, I realised that they were more than likely dinner-related, so I brought the phone up to my ear. The contents of

the phone call were regarding the cooking of rice. I confirmed the instructions with her and ended the call.
Just as I put the phone down on my desk, I was struck by a sudden realisation. It had been two days since I'd last touched the appliance. I didn't think that I had avoided it consciously. Somehow or other - though I wouldn't deny that there may have been some sort of significance to it - I had simply forgotten to touch my phone.
My phone that had a clamshell mechanism - I flipped it open and looked at my inbox. There wasn't a single unread message. It was only natural, completely natural. I continued by checking my sent messages. There, apart from the call function, the most recent use of my phone could be seen.
I had sent a message to her, my classmate.
A message with just one line.
I didn't know if she had read it.
Though I was about to leave my room for the kitchen, I once again returned to and lay face down upon my bed. The words I had sent her were being mulled over in my heart.
I didn't know if she had seen them.
"I want to eat your pancreas."
If she had read it, how would she have received the message?
While thinking about it, I fell asleep.
In the end, the rice was cooked by my mother when she returned home.
I met her in my dreams - maybe.

1

“I want to eat your pancreas.”

We were in the archive of the school library. While arranging the books on those dusty shelves - our duty as library committee members - Sakura Yamauchi made an odd confession.

Though I was thinking of simply ignoring it, the only ones in the vicinity were her and myself. Since talking to oneself would be a little bizarre, it must have been directed at me.

It couldn’t be helped - I responded to her, who was facing another bookshelf with her back to mine.

“Have you suddenly been awakened to cannibalism?”

She took a large breath and promptly choked on some dust, coughing a few times to clear her throat. Only then did she start to explain, her voice tinged with a sense of triumph. I didn’t turn to look at her.

“I saw it on TV yesterday - if someone in the past had a part of their body that wasn’t well, they would eat the corresponding part of another animal.”

“What about it?”

“Eat liver if your liver is unwell, eat stomach if your stomach is unwell - it seems they believed that doing so would cure their illness. That’s why I want to eat your pancreas.”

“Could it be that the ‘your’ you mentioned is referring to me?”

“Who else could it be?”

She giggled without looking my way, seemingly engaged in her work. I could hear the slam and rustle of hardcover books being arranged.

“My little organ could never bear the burden of something like saving you.”

“Seems like the pressure’s starting to make your stomach hurt, huh.”

“That’s why you should find someone else.”

“Then who should I find? Even someone like me wouldn’t consider eating my family.”

She giggled again. As for me, since I was calmly and diligently carrying out my task, I would’ve liked for her to take her work seriously too.

“In conclusion, there’s no one else I can depend on but Secret-Knowing-Classmate-kun.”

“So while coming up with your plans, you haven’t considered the possibility that I too need a pancreas?”

“But it’s not like you even know the function of a pancreas.”

“I do.”

I knew about it - that seldom-mentioned organ. I’d read up on it before. Naturally, she jumped at the opportunity.

I heard her breathing and her footsteps behind me, and knew that she had excitedly turned around. Staying angled to the bookshelf, I took just a momentary glance. Behind me was a sweaty girl, flashing a smile that no one would’ve expected from the terminally ill.

Even though we were in the era of global warming and it was already July, someone had neglected to switch on the air-conditioner; I was sweaty too.

“Could it be possible that you’ve read up on it?”

Her voice echoed a little, and I, who didn’t have a choice, answered her question.

“The pancreas aids in digestion and energy production. For example, it creates the insulin that’s used to turn sugar into energy. Without the pancreas, people would be unable to obtain energy and die. That’s why I can’t let you feast on my pancreas. Sorry.”

Having said everything I wanted to say, I returned to my task. She was roaring with laughter. Receiving my jokes like that had become a little speciality of hers, though this felt a little different.

“Who would’ve thought - Secret-Knowing-Classmate-kun has really taken an interest in me, huh.”

“……Well, there’s no exhausting the interest in classmates that suffer from serious illnesses.”

“I don’t mean it that way. What about me as a person?”

“……Who knows.”

“What’s up with that!”

She burst out into laughter once again. The adrenaline from the heat must have made her weird in the head. I was worried about my classmate’s condition.

We quietly continued our work, until the teacher in charge of the library came calling for us.

Somehow or other, it seemed like the time for the library to close had arrived. We marked our progress in sorting by pulling a book slightly out of line, after which we checked for forgotten items and left the archive. Leaving behind the sweltering heat of the archive, our sweat-soaked bodies shivered as we were reacquainted with the cool library air.

“It’s cold!”

She cheerfully spun around, entered the library reception counter, and wiped the sweat off her face with a towel conjured from her bag. I followed vaguely in her footsteps and began drying my own drenched body.

“Good work. We’re already closed, so take your time. Here, have some tea and snacks.”

“Woah, thank you!”

“Thank you.”

After taking a sip of the barley tea that Sensei had brought out, I took another look at the library. It was true - there wasn’t a single student left.

“The steamed bun’s delicious!”

The girl who pointed out every single positive thing was relaxing on the chair inside the counter. With a steamed bun in one hand, I dragged out a chair that was a little distance away from her and sat down too.

“Sorry for getting you two to help out, even though tests begin next week.”

“Don’t worry about it, it’s okay. We’re the kind that always get pretty average scores. Right? Secret-Knowing-Classmate-kun.”

“Well, if we listen during class, I guess so.”

I made an appropriate response and took a bite of the steamed bun.

It was delicious.

“Have the both of you begun thinking about university? What about you, Yamauchi-san?”

“I haven’t really thought about it - I mean, there’s still time.”

“What about you, Adult-Like-Student-kun?”

“I haven’t thought about it either.”

“That’s no good – you’ve got to think about it properly, Secret-Knowing-Classmate-kun!”

She held out her second steamed bun in her hands while making that unnecessary comment. I ignored her and took another sip of my barley tea. The taste of the familiar, widely-available barley tea was delicious.

“So the both of you haven’t really thought about the future, eh? If you continue being lazy, you’ll be the same age as me before you know it.”

“Ahaha, there’s no way that’s going to happen!”

“……”

While the two of them laughed merrily, I kept a straight face. I munched on my steamed bun and drank my barley tea.

It was as she said. There was no way that would happen.

It was impossible for her to become the same age as our teacher, who was in her forties. In this place, it was something only the girl and I knew, which was why she had winked at me and laughed. It was as though she were one of those actors from American films that winked when they told a joke.

But just to be clear, the reason I didn’t laugh wasn’t because of how ill-conceived her joke was. It was because of that proud face she made whenever she thought she had said something interesting - it was borderline mental.

Annoyed that I remained expressionless, she frowned at me. Having seen that, the edges of my lips finally curved up slightly.

After staying in the library for about an extra half an hour, we began to head home.

When we got to the shoe lockers, it was already 6 PM. Despite this, we could still hear the ruckus made by sports club members as they gave their all under the equally relentless sun.

“Wasn’t the archive hot?”

“Yeah.”

“We still have to do this again tomorrow, huh. But at least tomorrow’s the last school day of the week.”

“Yeah.”

“……Are you listening?”

“I am.”

I swapped my indoor shoes for my loafers and left through the hatch aligned with the lockers. The school gate was in the opposite direction from the sports field, so the voices of the baseball and rugby clubs slowly dwindled as I walked. With heavy footsteps, she caught up and positioned herself next to me.

“Haven’t you learned to listen properly when others are speaking?”

“I have - that’s why I’m listening properly right now.”

“Then, what was I talking about?”

“……Steamed buns.”

“So you weren’t listening! Lying is a no-no!”

She chided me like a kindergarten teacher. She - who was tall for a girl - and I - who was short for a boy - were almost of the same height. Truth be told, it was quite refreshing to be admonished by someone while having to look down slightly to face them.

“Sorry, sorry - I was thinking about something.”

“Hm? Thinking about what?”

Her frown dissolved instantly, as though she had never been upset in the first place. She peeked at me with curiosity written all over her face. After putting a little distance between us, I nodded slightly.

“Yeah, I’ve always been thinking about it, very seriously.”

“Oh! What’s wrong?”

“It’s about you.”

I didn’t stop, and I didn’t look in her direction - I was careful to make it a very ordinary conversation, without any sort of dramatic atmosphere. Because that would make things serious and troublesome.

Cutting past the words I had planned to say next, she -as expected - responded in a troublesome manner.

“Me? Huh, what, a love confession?! Wah! I’ll get nervous!”

“……It’s not that. Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“Is it really fine to spend the little remaining time you have to live on something like tidying up the library?”

Having heard my very casual question, she tilted her head to the side.

“It’s definitely fine.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Really? Then, what else should I be doing?”

“Well, don’t you want to do something like finding your first love, or taking a beach hike overseas and deciding where you want to spend your last moments?”

This time, she tilted her head to the other side.

“Hmm, it’s not like I don’t understand what you are trying to say. For example, even Secret-Knowing-Classmate-kun has things he wants to do before he dies, right?”

“……I wouldn’t say I don’t, I guess.”

“But right now, you aren’t doing those things, even though both you and I could die tomorrow. It’s with this understanding that both you and I carry on as we do, surely. The value of each and every day is the same - no matter what I did, to me, the value of today won’t change. I had fun today, you know.”

“……I see.”

Maybe it really was as she said. I was frustrated by her declaration, but at the same time, I understood it.

Even I - like her in the near future - would certainly die someday. Even though I couldn’t tell when my time would come, it was the inevitable future. Perhaps I would even die before her.

As expected, the words of people who were aware of their own demise had a certain depth to them. The views of the girl beside me stirred me up a little inside.

Of course, what I thought didn’t matter to her. Surely there were many people that liked her, so it was natural that she didn’t have the time to be interested in someone like me. As proof of that fact, boys wearing the soccer club uniform were running from the direction of the school gate, and they were all looking at her walking.

She recognised one of the boys running over, and she waved her hand at him.

“Do your best!”

“Thanks, Sakura!”

The soccer boys made refreshing smiles as they passed by us. If I recalled correctly, he should have been a classmate of mine, but he didn't give me a single look.

"He ignored Secret-Knowing-Classmate-kun. He better watch out tomorrow!"

"It's fine, and you should stop. Because I don't mind."

I really didn't mind. She and I were polar opposites, so it couldn't be helped that we would be treated differently by our classmate.

"Gah, that's precisely why you can't make any friends!"

"I know it's the truth, but you're too concerned about it."

"Argh, that's precisely why!"

In the midst of our conversation, we had reached the school gate. Our houses were in opposite directions from here on, so this was where I parted ways with her. What a real pity.

"Bye."

"Hey, about what we talked about earlier."

I, who was turning away without any hesitation, was stopped by her words.

She made a cheerful face, as though she had suddenly thought of something. I realised that I've never really expressed any sort of cheerfulness on my face.

"If I had to choose, I'd use the little remaining time of my life to help Secret-Knowing-Classmate-kun."

"What do you mean?"

"Are you free on Sunday?"

"Ah, sorry, I have a date with my cute girlfriend. She'll be hysterical if I leave her alone, so I can't."

"That's a lie, right?"

"And if it is?"

“Okay, so we’ll meet at 11 AM in front of the station! I’ll bring along the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ too!”

Having said that, without at all having asked for my acknowledgement, she waved her hand while walking in the opposite direction from my home.

The summer sky behind her was still orange and pink, and tinged most slightly with an ultramarine finish, it showered us with its fading glow.

Without returning the gesture, I once again turned my back to her and began to head home.

In the absence of her blusterous laughter, I continued to walk that familiar path home as the warm hues of the dying day made way for the evening blue. Surely, my view of the road home was different from hers.

I’d most probably continue walking on this road until I graduated.

How many more times would she get to walk on the same road?

But it was true - just as she said, even I wouldn’t know how many more times I would get to walk on this road. As such, the roads we walked weren’t so different.

I brought my finger to the side of my neck and made certain that I was alive. Taking each step to the beat of my heart, my mood was ruined as I felt my transient life tremble against my will.

The evening breeze blew against me, distracting me from my thoughts.

Just a little, I started to look forward to our outing on Sunday.

2

It all began in April, when the late-blooming sakura were still in bloom.

Medical science was advancing towards an unknown frontier. But I didn’t know any details about it, and I wasn’t interested in finding out more either.

All I could say was that at the very least, to medical science, it was progress to give an everyday life to a girl trapped in abnormality - a terminal condition that interfered with her life and would end it within a year. Which is to say, humans had gained the ability to extend their human lifespans.

I thought that it was machine-like to be able to move despite suffering from such an illness, but something like my own impressions didn’t matter to someone who was actually afflicted with the sickness.

Regardless of my unnecessary thoughts, she had been once more fully enjoying the benefits of medical science.

That was why it couldn’t be blamed on anything else but her bad luck and the sudden turn of events that caused me, who should have only been a classmate, to find out about her illness.

That day, I had taken a break from school. It was because of my appendectomy - not the surgery itself, but the removal of the stitches. My frequent visits to the hospital for follow-up treatment were coming to an end. I was supposed to have shown up late to school, but long waiting times at the large hospital had sapped me of any remaining enthusiasm for learning, and I remained loitering in the hospital’s lobby.

It was a trivial feeling. In the corner of the lobby, sitting on a lonely sofa, was a book that had been left behind. I wondered by whom it had been abandoned, as well as of its contents. My curiosity sparked by a love of books took control, and I began to walk over.

Navigating through the spaces between patients, I arrived at the other end of the lobby and sat myself down on the sofa. Judging by its appearance, the book was an approximately 300-page thick paperback. Its secrets were guarded closely by a dust jacket from the bookshop near the hospital.

When I removed the dust jacket to check the title, I was met with a little surprise. Beneath it was not the original cover that should have been wrapped around the book - inscribed upon it instead were the words ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ handwritten with a thick magic marker. Of course, I’d never heard of the title or the publisher.

I wondered just what it could be, but since I couldn’t think of a suitable answer no matter how much I thought about it, I flipped to the first page.

The words I saw on the very first page were not printed in a typeface that I was accustomed to. They had instead been carefully handwritten with a ballpoint pen - which meant that this article had been written by a person.

“23rd November 20XX

My everyday thoughts and activities in Japan - I plan on writing them down in this disease coexistence journal. No one other than my family knows about it, but I am going to die in a few years. Having accepted this fact, I am writing for the sake of living with my illness. To start things off, pancreatic diseases like what I’ve been diagnosed with a little earlier are the kings of sudden deaths. Even today, my symptoms have been mostly unnoticeable……”

“Pancreas…… Die……”

Without thinking, words that weren’t uttered on a daily basis spilt out of my mouth.

I see, evidently, it seemed like this belonged to someone whose lifespan had been determined - a disease confrontation diary, no, a disease coexistence diary. It wasn’t really something that I should have looked at.

Having come to that realisation, I closed the book. Still seated down, I heard a voice from above my head.

“Erm……”

I lifted my head in response to the voice, my shock not showing on my face. To my surprise, I recognised the face of the voice’s owner. I kept my emotions hidden, assuming that she had approached me for something unrelated to the book.

With that said, even someone like me may have been in denial of the possibility that my classmate was shouldering the fate of having her life cut short.

Having been approached by a classmate, I put on an attentive look, quietly anticipating her reply. She extended an arm to me, looking as though she were snickering at my response.

“That belongs to me. Plain-Looking-Classmate-kun, why did you come to the hospital?”

Incidentally, I didn’t know anything about my classmate except that she possessed a bright perkiness that was the antithesis to my usual silence. Which was why I was taken aback that she could flash a brave smile in this situation, wherein a mere acquaintance like me had found out that she was suffering from a major illness.

Even so, I decided that I would pretend I didn’t know about anything to the best of my ability. I believed that for both her and me, that would have been the best choice.

“I had an appendectomy a while back, but I still have to go for treatment.”

“Ah, I see. I had a check-up for my pancreas. Otherwise I’ll die.”

Why would she say something like that? In no time at all, without noticing, she had crushed my consideration into pieces.

I observed her expressions, trying to no avail to read her true intentions. Her smile deepened as she sat down beside me.

“Are you surprised? You read it, didn’t you? The ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’.”

Seemingly unbothered, the girl talked as though she were recommending a novel to me. Which was why I even thought that she had been playing a prank and it just so happened that I, an acquaintance, had fallen for it.

See, I’ve exposed the bluff.

“I was surprised. I thought that I’d lost it, so I came here searching for it in a huge panic, but it turns out that it was just with Plain-Looking-Classmate-kun.”

“……What does it mean? This.”

“What does this mean? That’s my ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’. Haven’t you read it? It’s like a diary that I’ve been writing since I found out about my pancreatic disease.”

“……You’re joking, right?”

Even though she was inside a hospital, without any hesitation, she roared with laughter.

“Just how tasteless of a person do you think I am? I wouldn’t make that kind of dark joke, you know? Everything that’s written down is true - I can’t use my pancreas and I’m going to die soon, yup.”

“…….Ah, I see.”

“Eh! That’s all? Don’t you have anything else to say?”

Her voice trembled with shock.

“……No, but what should I say after being told that my classmate is going to die soon?”

“Hmm, if it were me, I guess I’d be at a loss for words.”

“Exactly. And if I didn’t go silent, I’d want to assess the situation.”

She started to giggle as she said, “I guess that’s true.” I didn’t know what she found so amusing.

Immediately after that, she took the book, got up, waved her hand at me and headed deeper into the hospital. “No one else knows about this, so don’t tell the class okay?” She said as she left. Thinking that I surely wouldn’t be having any more exchanges with her after this, I felt a little relieved.

Contrary to my expectations however, she called out to me on the very next morning, just as we passed each other by in the school corridor. Incidentally, the distribution of duties was decided freely by each class, and as a result, I was the only one to put my name up for the vacancy in the library committee. Though I didn’t understand the motives behind her actions, as someone who tended to get lost in the flow of things, I continued to quietly think about the work that would be assigned to the new library committee members.

✵

Come to think of it, it was all because of that one paperback that I was now standing in front of the station at 11 AM on a Sunday - you really don't know how things will play out in this world.

Just like a reed boat that could not go against strong currents, I was unable to reject her invitation, or to be exact, I was unable to find the right timing to reject her - and as such, I now stood at our meeting point.

I would've been glad to renege on our agreement, but I spotted her in the distance, looking a little troubled, like she was going to ask for help or directions if anyone showed her weakness. Unlike me however, she would carve out her own path to break the ice - it would be no exaggeration to call her a reed boat that went against the flow.

I had arrived in front of the monument that marked our meeting point five minutes before the agreed time, and was waiting in a daze when she appeared right on time.

It was the first time since our chance meeting at the hospital that I saw her wearing casual clothes - simple items like a T-shirt and a pair of jeans.

She walked over with a smile and in response, I lightly raised my hand.

"Good morning! I was thinking about what to do if you went back on our promise!"

"I'd be lying if I said that was impossible."

"But wasn't the end result ol' right?"

"I get the feeling that your word usage is a little off. With that said, what are we doing today?"

"Oh, well aren't you getting fired up."

She stared at me with a strong gaze before breaking into a smile, looking as if she had always been smiling. Incidentally, I wasn't the least bit fired up.

"For now, let's just go to the city."

"But I don't really like crowds."

“Secret-Knowing-Classmate-kun, did you bring the train fare? Could you take it out?”

“I brought it.”

In the end, I simply gave in, and we headed to the city just as she had proposed. Just as I had feared, the huge station where various shops were clustered was fraught with thronging, cacophonous crowds. The mere sight made me shudder with apprehension.

As for the girl beside me, she didn’t look the least bit daunted by the large crowd. Was this person really going to die soon? Although such doubts did arise, since she had already shown me various official documents, there was no room for suspicion.

After passing through the ticket gate, she continued onwards, cutting a path through the unremitting waves of people. Somehow managing to keep her within my sights, we made our way to the underground passageway where the crowd dispersed a little. Only then did she finally disclose to me our objective for the day.

“First off is *yakiniku*!”

“*Yakiniku*? But it’s still morning you know?”

“Will the taste of the meat be any different in the afternoon and at night?”

“It’s unfortunate, but rather than there being a difference, I just don’t crave for meat all day.”

“Then there’s no problem. I want to have some *yakiniku*.”

“But I just had my breakfast at 10 AM.”

“It’s fine, since people that hate *yakiniku* don’t exist.”

“Are you even paying attention to our conversation?”

It didn’t seem like it.

My protests fell on deaf ears and the next thing I knew, I was seated opposite her in front of a genuine charcoal stove. I really did follow her like a reed boat. The dim store wasn’t really crowded, and the individual lights shining on each table made it unnecessarily easy to see each other’s faces.

In no time at all, a young waiter had kneeled down at the side of the table and started to take our order. While I was taken aback, as if it was proof of her mastery of mathematics, she smoothly responded to the waiter.

“This most expensive one.”

“Wait a minute, I didn’t bring that much money.”

“It’s fine, since I’m paying. Two of the most expensive all-you-can-eat courses, please. As for the drinks, you’re fine with oolong tea, right?”

I went along with the momentum and nodded while she continued on like she was at home; the young waiter quickly repeated the order and left.

“Waaah, I can’t wait!”

“……Erm, I’ll make sure to pay you back for today.”

“I told you it’s fine, don’t mind it. I’m paying. Up until before, I was working too, so I have money saved up and it wouldn’t do to not use it.”

Before she died - though she didn’t say it, she must have meant something like that.

“That’s even worse. You should spend it on something with more meaning.”

“But there’s meaning in this - it wouldn’t be fun to eat *yakiniku* alone, right? I’m just spending money for my own enjoyment.”

“But you see-”

“Sorry for the wait. Here are the drinks.”

While I was starting my next retort, with exquisite timing, the waiter appeared carrying two glasses of oolong tea on a tray. It felt like she had summoned the waiter to end our talk about money. She giggled as a grin spread over her face.

The assorted meat platter followed the drinks a little while later. The beautifully arranged meat, frankly speaking, looked extremely tantalising. It must have been because of the so-called marbling. The pattern of the fat stood out vividly, and the meat looked like it would’ve tasted just as good raw, though the very thought would probably have been repulsive to many.

Once the cooking grate mounted on top of the charcoal stove seemed sufficiently hot, she snatched a slice of meat between her chopsticks and hastily laid it on the grill. The strip of meat began to sizzle as it fell on the scorching metal, giving off the signature, mouth-watering aroma of cooking meat - my stomach could but begin to growl in response. Since growing high school students couldn't control their appetites, I started to cook the meat together with her. On top of the hot stove, the meat was cooked in no time.

"Thanks for the meal. Mmph!"

"Thank you for the meal. Hmm, well, it's pretty tasty huh."

"What, only that level of excitement? Isn't it super-duper tasty? Or do you think I'm just more sentimental because I'm going to die soon?"

No, the meat tasted exceptionally delicious. There was simply a gap in our tension levels.

"This is great. I wonder if the rich only eat food this tasty."

"The rich don't come to all-you-can-eat buffets, probably."

"I see - but it's a waste for such good meat to be included in buffets."

"Everything is an all-you-can-eat buffet for the rich though."

Even though our stomachs shouldn't have had that much space, the two portions of assorted meat quickly disappeared. She took the menu at the edge of the table and started scrutinising the add-ons.

"Is anything fine?"

"I'll leave it to you."

I'll leave it to you - I found that such a phrase fit me rather well.

She wordlessly raised her hand, and having spotted her signal from somewhere, the waiter promptly arrived at our table. She casted a reprehensive glance at me for flinching at the waiter's dedication, and proceeded to make orders from the menu sheet with unprecedented eloquence.

"Giara, kobukuro, teppou, hachinosu, mino, hatsu, nekutai, korikori, fuwa, senmai, shibire."

“Wait wait wait, what are you ordering?”

It was awkward to stand in the way of the waiter’s work, but she was spewing out words I wasn’t used to hearing, so I had to open my mouth.

“Kobukuro? Huh, they sell that band’s CDs?”

“What are you talking about? Ah, for now we’ll just have one serving of each.”

The waiter smiled in acknowledgment of her order and left hurriedly.

“*Hachi*? Did you just order bees? Insects can be eaten?”

“Ah, perhaps you don’t know? *Kobukuro* and *hachinosu* are the names of specific parts of a cow. Personally, I really like *horumon*!”

“You mean innards? Cows have parts with such interesting names?”

“Don’t humans have them too? Like the funny bone.”

“I don’t where it’s located though.”

“Incidentally, *shibire* is the pancreas.”

“Could it be that eating innards is a part of your treatment?”

“I could just keep on eating *horumon* forever. If someone asked me what my favourite food was, I’d reply with *horumon*. I love innards!”

“How am I supposed to respond to your enthusiasm?”

“I forgot to ask for white rice. You want some?”

“I don’t.”

After a little while, the many dishes of innards she had ordered arrived, arranged into a single set. The sight was more grotesque than I had imagined, and as such, I lost some of my appetite.

She asked for some white rice from the waiter, and cheerfully started to arrange the *horumon* on the stove. Since it couldn’t be helped, I assisted her too.

“Hey, this is done cooking!”

Unable to stand by and watch as I didn’t do anything when the appearance of the *horumon* changed, she grumpily stepped in and placed the perforated white thing on my plate. Since it was one of my principles not to play around or waste food, I cautiously brought it to my mouth.

“Isn’t it delicious?”

Truth be told, the texture was good, it was fragrant, and it tasted better than I had thought it would, but the feeling that I did something I shouldn’t have rose up from my stomach, and I tilted my head to the side in apprehension. As always, she flashed a smile for some unknown reason.

I checked if she had any oolong tea left, then asked the waiter for another cup, as well as a little more of the normal meat.

I silently consumed the meat, and she, the *horumon*. From time to time, I would eat the *horumon*, and she would smirk before glaring at me with an annoyed face. In such instances, she would eat the *horumon* she had so carefully cooked with an “aah!” and the dissatisfaction on her face would clear instantly.

“Y’know, I don’t want to be cremated.”

While enjoying the *yakiniku*, she had clearly brought up the wrong topic for this location.

“What was that?”

Since there was the possibility of me mishearing things, I tried to get a confirmation, and she responded with a serious face.

“Like I was saying, I don’t want to be cremated. I don’t want to get roasted after I die.”

“Is that something you should be saying while eating *yakiniku*?”

“It would be as if I really disappeared from this world. Would it be impossible to let others eat me or something?”

“Let’s stop talking about the disposal of corpses while eating meat.”

“I’d let you eat my pancreas.”

“Are you listening?”

“It seems that some countries have the belief that the soul of the person that was eaten will continue to live on inside the one that ate them.”

Somehow, or rather, as per usual, she looked like she hadn’t heard me at all. Or maybe she did but was disregarding me. I got the feeling it was the latter.

“Is it really impossible?”

“……It probably is. In terms of ethics. But in terms of the law, I haven’t looked it up so I don’t really know.”

“I see, that’s too bad. So I can’t give you my pancreas, huh.”

“I don’t need it.”

“You won’t eat it?”

“It’s precisely because of your pancreas that you’re going to die. So that must be where the largest fragment of your soul is located. And your soul seems noisy.”

“That’s true.”

She roared cheerfully with laughter. She was already this noisy while living, so there was definitely no way the pancreas of this girl who had become an expert on the soul would not be noisy too. I’m sorry, but I’d never eat something like that.

If we compared, she had eaten much more than I did. She stuffed herself with meat, rice, and *horumon* until she said, “Ugh, it hurts.” As for me, I stopped when my stomach bulged out to the appropriate level, and I was satisfied. Of course, from the very beginning, I didn’t order more than I could eat, and I didn’t commit the folly of burying the table in side menu items like she did.

After the meal, the waiter took away the many empty dishes as well as the obsolete charcoal stove, and at last brought us sherbet as dessert. The girl who had proclaimed “I’m not feeling well” and “it hurts” returned to life at the appearance of the frozen treat. She took in a breath of fresh air, and as though her complaints had all been lies, she started being noisy again.

“Don’t you have any dietary restrictions?”

“Just basic ones. But, even those were a result of ten years of evolution of the medical science here. Isn’t the power of humans amazing? We may suffer from illnesses, but they don’t threaten our daily activities at all. I guess that such an evolutionary pathway is directed at finding cures, huh.”

“That’s true.”

I didn’t really know much about medical science, but this was one of the unusual cases where I agreed with her opinion. I heard from somewhere that in this world, rather than curing terminal illnesses, treatment is focused on helping people live with them instead. But no matter how I thought about it, technology that should continue to advance is still technology to cure, not a means to get along with diseases. However, even if we said that, we were aware that there was no way medical science was progressing on its own. For it to progress, the only means were to have those entering medical faculties study especially hard. Of course, she didn’t have the time to wait for that to happen. And as for me, there was no meaning in doing so.

“What’s next?”

“You mean in the future? I haven’t got it together.”

“I don’t mean that. Hey, I’ve been thinking about it since before, but don’t you think you’re putting me in a tough spot by cracking jokes like that?”

She gave me a blank look, then started to chuckle. She was a person that had extreme changes in facial expressions. I didn’t think that she, as a living creature, was very similar to me. But it may have been precisely because we were different that our destinies were different.

“Nope, I haven’t made those jokes in front of anyone but you either. Wouldn’t most just pull back? But you’re amazing. You’re speaking normally to a classmate that’s going to die soon. If it were me, it would probably have been impossible. It’s because you’re amazing that I can say what I want to say.”

“You’ve overestimated me.”

Completely.

“But I don’t think so, since Secret-Knowing-Classmate-kun doesn’t make sad faces in front of me. Or is it possible that you cry for me at home?”

“I don’t.”

“Then you should!”

There was no way I’d cry. I wouldn’t do something inappropriate like that. I didn’t feel sad, and I especially didn’t want to show that emotion in front her. She didn’t show sadness, so it was inappropriate for anyone to do so in her stead.

“To backtrack on the conversation, what’s next?”

“Ah, the topic changed! Were you going to cry? I’m going to buy a rope next.”

“No way I’d cry. A rope?”

“Oh, so you’re capable of saying things in a manly manner, huh. Could you be trying to make my heart beat faster? Yeah, a rope. For suicide.”

“Who would make a move on someone that’s going to die soon? For suicide?”

“I did think that suicide would’ve been fine too - to kill myself before the disease does. But I don’t think I’ll commit suicide anymore. I’m just buying a rope for the sake of mischief. Speaking of which, Secret-Knowing-Classmate-kun is horrible! I may even be driven to suicide by the hurt.”

“Mischief? Seems like the talk about whether you’re going to commit suicide or not has become all jumbled up. For now, let’s just conclude this conversation.”

“That’s true - so have you had a girlfriend?”

“I don’t want to hear in detail how you were going to conclude this, so let’s just stop talking now.”

Since she looked like she was going to say something, I took the initiative and stood up. I didn’t see the order slip anywhere around the table, so I called the waiter to ask for it and indicated that we were ready to leave. She said “let’s go” while giggling, and stood up too.

Evidently, she was the type of person that didn’t end any of their conversations with regrets. This was a convenient characteristic of hers that she had revealed. I thought that I should keep the initiative from now on.

After exiting the *yakiniku* store, we held our full bellies and went outside, where we were struck by sun rays typical of summer brilliance. I narrowed my eyes on reflex. “What great weather! Maybe I’ll die on a day like this.” I had no idea how to counter what she had muttered, but for now I decided that ignoring her was the most effective means of opposing her. Just like how it was no good to look a savage beast in the eye - it was that kind of feeling.

We started to move towards the large shopping centre connected to the station after a light discussion - even if we called it a discussion, as you may have guessed, it was mostly just her talking. The renowned home centre within the mall sold a variety of things, including the suicide-enabling rope which she so desired.

Though the shopping centre that we had reached with just a short walk was overflowing with people, there wasn’t anyone in the rope section of the home centre. Surely the only people that would pick out a rope on a day with good weather like this would be traders, cowboys, and dying girls.

The voices of children frolicking about could be heard from afar as I compared the sizes of nails a short distance away from her, while she consulted a young sales assistant.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for a rope that can be used for suicide, but I don’t really want any external wounds, so what type would be the safest for this case?”

I clearly heard the question that had been asked by the girl who was weird in the head. I turned around to see the sales assistant’s obviously bewildered expression, which made me laugh just a little. After which, I realised that she had made another one of her jokes, vexing me. Something that was safe even though it was for suicide - that was the joke she’d made. The sales assistant and I were both caught off guard and bewildered, but I put on a smile. I returned the nails of varying sizes into their respective containers one by one, then moved closer to the sales assistant and the girl who I could tell was laughing just by looking at her back.

“Sorry. She doesn’t have much time left to live, so she’s become a little weird in the head.”

I didn’t know if the sales assistant was convinced by my lifeboat, or whether he was just weirded out, but he left us and returned to his own work.

“Argh, just when I was going to have the sales assistant introduce the products. Don’t get in my way. Could it be that you got jealous of the close relationship between me and the sales assistant?”

“If that could be called a close relationship, then nobody would think of making tempura out of oranges.”

“What do you mean?”

“I said something meaningless so please don’t pursue it.”

Even though I had said it because I thought that it would’ve annoyed her, in a heartbeat, she started to roar unnecessarily with laughter like usual.

The girl, whose mood had become unusually good for some reason, quickly grabbed a rope and bought it together with a tote bag that had a cute picture of a cat printed on it. I then left the home centre with her, who was humming and twirling around the bag in which she kept the rope. Just how merry was she while leaving the home centre to attract the attention and misunderstanding of the people around us?

“Secret-Knowing-Classmate-kun, what’s next?”

“I’m just following you around, so I don’t really have any objectives in mind.”

“Huh, is that so? Is there anywhere you’d like to go?”

“If I had to choose one, I guess it’d be the bookstore.”

“Are you going to buy a book?”

“Nope, I like going to bookstores even without a purpose.”

“Ooh, that’s just like a proverb from Sweden.”

“What do you mean?”

“I said something meaningless so please don’t think too hard about it, hahaha.”

It seemed that she really was in a good mood. I simply got annoyed. While expressing opposite emotions, we headed towards the large bookstore in the same shopping centre. Once we arrived, I walked towards the new literary books corner without any regard for her. She didn’t follow me.

Having been given time alone for the first time in a while, I fully enjoyed looking through the paperbacks.

While admiring countless paperback covers and reading countless prologues, time passed by imperceptibly. It was a sensation likely familiar to those who loved books, but it wasn't as though all humans shared the same love for them. That was why I felt a little guilty when I checked my watch, and looked around the store for her. She was smiling as she browsed through a fashion magazine. I thought it was amazing that she was able to show her happiness even while browsing. I was unable to do that.

I approached her, but before I could call out to her, she noticed me and looked my way. I apologised frankly.

"Sorry, I forgot about you."

"How mean! But well, it's fine. Since I was reading a book the entire time. Secret-Knowing-Classmate-kun, do you have any interest in fashion?"

"Nope. I guess I don't really care what I wear as long as it's inconspicuous and plain."

"I thought you'd say that. I'm interested though. Once I become a university student I'll drown myself in lots of alcohol - just kidding, since I'll die soon. But for humans, substance really is more important than appearances huh."

"Seems like you've flawlessly made use of words in the wrong manner."

I looked around without looking at anything specifically. Since I thought that her remark may have attracted some attention. But it seemed like there wasn't anyone around that had the slightest interest in the outrageous words of a high school girl.

Neither of us bought anything from the bookshop. In fact, we didn't buy anything after that either. After we left the bookshop, on her whim, we entered an accessories shop and a glasses shop that caught her eye, but we left both shops without purchasing a single thing. In the end, the only things she had bought were the rope and the tote bag.

Tired of walking, as per her suggestion, we entered a nation-wide chain café. The store was crowded, but luckily, we were able to find seats. While she waited, I went to order for the both of us. She wanted an iced café au lait. I ordered my own iced coffee with the café au lait at the cash register, placed them on a tray, and returned to our table. If you were wondering

what she was doing while waiting, she was scribbling on the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ with a pen.

“Ah, thanks. How much was it?”

“It’s fine, you paid for the *yakiniku* after all.”

“I really paid for it because I wanted to, so it’s fine. But I guess I’ll let you treat me to this much.”

Cheerfully, she placed the straw in the glass and sipped on the café au lait. Perhaps expressing happiness at every little thing was actually a bother to her. I bowed myself before her for always being able to look positive about something.

“Hehe, do you think we look like a couple to others?”

“Even if we did look like one, that’s not how we really are, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Wah, you’re really dry huh.”

“If you think about it, any two-person group that consists of different genders could be a couple, and if it’s just by appearances, no one can tell that you’re going to die soon. What’s important is not the views of others, but substance. Didn’t you say that too?”

“As expected of Secret-Knowing-Classmate-kun, huh.”

Since she was laughing as she started to drink the café au lait, the sound of air bubbles escaping from her glass could be heard.

“So, has Secret-Knowing-Classmate-kun ever had a girlfriend?”

“Alright, break time’s over.”

“But you haven’t even taken a sip of the iced coffee.”

Evidently, the same trick wouldn’t work twice. Just as I was about to stand up, she grabbed hold of my arm. I wanted her to stop digging her nails into me. Perhaps this was her revenge for when I cut the topic short at the *yakiniku* store. Not wanting to incur her wrath, I quietly reseated myself.

“So? Have you had one?”

“Who knows.”

“Speaking of which, I feel like I don’t know a single thing about you.”

“That may be so, huh. I don’t really like talking about myself.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to get dizzy and overly self-conscious talking about something that no one is interested in.”

“Why did you decide that nobody is interested?”

“It’s because I don’t have any interest in people. Everyone’s the same - after all, people fundamentally have no interest in anyone but themselves. Of course, exceptions exist too. Even I’m a little interested in people like you that are suffering because of special conditions. That’s why I don’t really care to talk about something that no one gains anything from.”

I laid them bare to her – my usual thoughts, which I felt line up neatly on the desktop as I stared at the grain of the table. This kind of theory, too, had been collecting dust at the very depths of my heart. Of course, that was because I hadn’t had a partner to discuss this with.

“I’m interested, you know.”

I brushed the dust off my theory, considered the circumstances and memories it involved, and found myself unable to understand her words. I finally looked up again, and was met with a sight that surprised me. Her vivid expression was conveying a single feeling. Even I, who was ignorant of others, could tell with just one glance how hard she was trying to hold back her anger.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m saying that I’m interested in you. I wouldn’t ask someone out to have fun if I wasn’t interested in them. So don’t make me look dumb.”

Honestly, I didn’t really understand what she was saying. Her reason for taking an interest in me, and her reason for getting angry - I didn’t understand them. And even more than that, I wasn’t making her look dumb.

“I do wonder from time to time if you were dumb, but I’m not making you look dumb, okay.”

“It may be just as you said, but I’m hurt!”

“Ahh, I see…… Sorry.”

Without understanding the meaning behind her words, I just apologised. This was the single most effective method to deal with angry people, and I wasn’t unwilling to use it. And sure enough, just like other angry people, her expression began to soften even while her cheeks were still puffed out.

“If you answer properly, I’ll forgive you.”

“……Hearing it won’t make you have more fun.”

“Just tell me, since I’m interested.”

Without me noticing, the edge of her lips had curved upwards. I didn’t feel like opposing her, I didn’t have any way out, and I was a conformist, but I didn’t consider myself pitiable. I was a simply a reed boat.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to meet your expectations though.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine - so, your answer?”

“Probably from around elementary school onwards, I haven’t had any memory of having friends.”

“……Memory loss?”

“……Maybe you really are dumb.”

While I seriously doubted it, since it was possible that the chances of suffering from an incurable disease at her age were lower than getting amnesia, there may have been some justification for her remark. With the intention of retracting my previous statement, I clarified myself to her, whose face was easy to read.

“It means that I didn’t have any friends. That’s why, someone like a girlfriend that you’re asking about - of course I’ve never had one.”

“So you’ve neeever had any friends? Not just in the present?”

“Yeah, I don’t have any interest in people, so no one takes an interest in me either. It’s a relief not having to lose anybody.”

“But haven’t you ever wanted friends?”

“I wonder. It may be fun to have them, but I believe that the confines of a novel are more enjoyable than the real world.”

“So that’s why you’re always reading a book.”

“Probably. So this concludes our uninteresting talk about me. I’m just asking out of social etiquette, but what about you? If you have a boyfriend, rather than spending time with me, it would be better to spend it with him.”

“I had one, but we just broke up recently.”

She said that without looking the least bit dejected.

“Because you’re going to die soon?”

“Nope. I couldn’t possibly tell my boyfriend something like that. Since I haven’t even told my friends.”

Then why would she openly tell me back then? I didn’t care to know, and I didn’t ask. Like usual.

“He, well, ah, you know him too. Since he’s in our class. Though you probably won’t remember him even if I mentioned his name, wahaha. He’s erm, someone that’s really great to be friends with, but he’s no good to become lovers with.”

“So there are people like that.”

Not even having a friend to begin with, I hadn’t known that.

“Yeah, there really are. That’s why I broke up with him. It’d be great if the gods had put tags on everyone from the very beginning. Something like this person is only for making friends with, and that person is fine even as a lover.”

“I guess that would make things easier for me. But it seems that for people like you, it’s the complexity of human relationships that makes them interesting.”

She roared heartily with laughter at my opinion.

“It’s just as you said, huh! Yup, I guess I agree with you, so, I take back what I said earlier about the tags. Seems like you really understand me.”

“……”

I was going to deny it, but I stopped. I thought that it may have been true. That was because the reason for it came to mind. I did understand her.

“……It must be because we’re opposites.”

“Opposites?”

“You are the opposite of me, so that may be why you think of the things I don’t seem to think about.”

“You said something a little profound, huh, is it the influence of your novels?”

“Probably.”

The truth was that there hadn’t been any need or plan for us to get involved with each other - it was as if we stood on opposite ends.

Until a few months ago, the only points of association between us were the fact that we shared the same class, and that her noisy laughter would intermittently burst into my ears. It had really been too noisy, so even though I wasn’t interested in people, her name came to mind immediately when I saw her at the hospital. The fact that it got stuck somewhere in my head - that must also have been because we were opposites.

While sipping her café au lait, she cheerfully mentioned “it’s good!” along with her other various impressions of the drink. I quietly drank my coffee that remained black.

“Ah, we really may be opposites huh - when we had *yakiniku* earlier, you kept on eating karubi and roosu. Even though it looked like you were going to start eating the *horumon*.”

“It tasted better than I expected, but in the end, normal meat still tastes the best. Doesn’t willingly eating the innards of living things seem like the sort of thing a devil would do? Putting tonnes of sugar and milk into coffee is something a devil would do too. Since coffee is already perfect as it is.”

“Looks like your preferences in food don’t match up with mine, huh.”

“I don’t think it’s just food though.”

We lingered at the café for another hour. The things we talked about in that time were extremely trivial. Life, death, illnesses, or our futures - we didn't talk about any of that. Instead, our chat mainly revolved around her talking about our classmates. I did try to take an interest in them, but her efforts pretty much ended in failure.

I was interested in our classmates' silly mess-ups and pure love stories to the same extent that I was not a person that only knew boring stories. She must have noticed those feelings of mine because I wasn't a person who was able to hide their boredom either. Even so, I did take the slightest of interest in the expressions of that girl talking with all her might. Though if it were me, I wouldn't have wasted my time or effort.

It was about time to head home - when that kind of mood, which I wasn't sure who initiated, started to set in, I asked her about the thing I'd been interested in.

"Incidentally, what are you going to do with the rope? You aren't going to commit suicide, right? Though you did say it was for the sake of mischief."

"I am going to be up to some mischief, but even with that said, I won't be able to see the outcome, so Secret-Knowing-Classmate-kun should witness it in my stead. You see, I'll allude to the rope in the 'Disease Coexistence Journal', and then the people that find the rope will misunderstand that I was cornered to the point that I killed myself. It's that kind of mischief."

"How tasteless."

"It's alright, it's alright - I'll clearly write that it's actually a lie. It's better to pick them up after they fall, right?"

"I don't think that will make anyone happy, but maybe it's better than nothing?"

I was dismayed, but I found that her line of thinking which expectedly diverged from my own was amusing. If it were me, I wouldn't have bothered with something like the responses of the people around me after I die.

We headed for the station from the café, somehow managed to board the train despite the huge crowd, and while still standing, reached our town after a short talk.

Since the both of us had ridden our bikes to the station, we went to the free bicycle parking lot to retrieve them, and after walking to somewhere near our school, waved each other goodbye. She said, "See you tomorrow". Since

there weren't any library committee activities tomorrow, I probably wouldn't get to speak with her, but I still replied with a single "yeah".

The road I was using to bike home was the usual road - I wondered how many more times I would be able to see it. Huh? That was strange. Up until yesterday, the fear that I would inevitably die and disappear had been stirring within my heart, but now it had settled a little. Perhaps, because the girl I met today looked far from death, my sense of the reality that I would one day die had dulled.

On this day, I started to doubt just a little that she was going to die.

I reached home, read a book, ate the dinner my mother made, bathed, drank barley tea in the kitchen, greeted my father "welcome home", and while returning to my room with the thought of reading another book, I received a message on my cellphone. I basically didn't use my phone's messaging function, so I thought the new message notification was strange. I flipped my phone open and learnt that the message was from her. Now that I thought about it, I remembered that with the library committee contact network and all, I had exchanged e-mail addresses with her.

I lay down on my bed and opened her message. Its contents were as such:

"Thanks for the hard work!! I tried messaging you - did it reach? Thanks for going out with me today [peace sign] I had so much fun! [smiley face] I'd be really happy if you'd go out with me again [smiley face] Until I die, let's continue to get along! Okay, goodnight! [smiley face] See you tomorrow!"

The first thing that came to mind was that I had forgotten about returning her the money for the *yakiniku*. Even if it was impossible to do so tomorrow, so that I wouldn't forget, I recorded it down with my phone's notebook function. Thinking of replying simply, I reread the message.

Get along, huh.

Usually, I would've kept on looking at "until I die" - her signature joke - but I was more interested in the part that came after.

I see, we were getting along.

I tried thinking through the entirety of today, and I thought that we probably really did get along.

I was going to message her the entirety of what had unexpectedly come to mind, but I stopped. I got the feeling that she would be disappointed if I told her.

I too had a little fun today.

What had been confined in the depths of my heart, I sent them to her in a message - the words “see you tomorrow”.

On top of my bed, I flipped open a paperback. The girl who was on the opposite side - I wondered what she was doing.

3

Yesterday night, after I had gone to sleep, a murder took place in the next prefecture. It seemed like it was a random attack of some sort - of course, it was all over TV in the morning.

That was why I thought the case would've been a hot topic at school as well, even though our examinations were starting today. But for my class at least, neither the case nor the tests were the focus of everyone's discussions. To my annoyance, I found them buzzing about yet another topic instead.

In other words, they were trying to solve the mystery behind why she, who was cheerful, energetic, and popular, and I, the most plain and glum person in class, were out together on a day off. I thought that if there was an answer, I'd like to know it too, but since I was minimising contact with my classmates as usual, I wasn't blessed with the opportunity to ask.

Something happened after we'd met each other in the library committee - that was the scenario they seemed to have settled on for now. I had hoped to be left out of their fantastic denouement, but outspoken girls with the courage to do unnecessary things went to ask her directly with loud voices, and in response to that unnecessary action, she unnecessarily said something unnecessary.

"We get along well."

I recognised that my classmates were all focused on me, so just in case, I paid more attention than usual to their conversation - which was also why I heard her endlessly unnecessary statement. I felt my classmates' stares shifting to me after her proclamation. Of course, I pretended not to notice them.

Every time we completed a test, my almost silent classmates would throw me glances, wordlessly casting me within the shadows of their doubt and bafflement - but as always, I just continued to ignore them.

An instance in which I could no longer avoid involvement came just once, at the end of the third hour - but even that was quickly resolved.

One of the girls that questioned her earlier with neither reservation nor consideration trotted over and started talking to me.

“Hey, hey - Plain-Classmate-kun, do you get along with Sakura?”

I thought that she must have been a good person for having asked that. The reason for such was that my other classmates were all observing us from a distance. Both before and right now, they must have made use of her easy-going personality, and sent her to the front lines.

I sympathised with my classmate, whose exact name I was unable to recall, and gave her an answer.

“Not particularly. We just happened to meet yesterday.”

“Hmm.”

Having heard and received my words, the kind and honest girl said, “Got i~t,” as she returned to a coterie of other classmates.

I didn’t hesitate to lie in times like this. Since I had to protect myself, as well as guard her secret, it couldn’t be helped. Even for the girl who said nothing but unnecessary things, the reason she met me was linked to her incurable disease - seeing as it was the most confidential of secrets, perhaps she would be willing to fabricate a cover story with me.

With that, the first hurdle was over. At the end of the fourth hour, the tests were over - I expected to score slightly above the class average this time too. Without really talking to anyone, I started to pack up and go home. Even though I didn’t have anything to do afterwards, I wanted to quickly go home. While thinking about such things, I was about to leave the classroom when a loud voice stopped me.

“Wait, wait! Affable-Classmate-kun!”

I turned around and saw her, who was grinning from ear to ear, and my classmates, who looked on with suspicion. The truth was that I wanted to ignore both parties, but since it couldn’t be helped, I ignored the latter and waited for the girl that was walking over.

“We need to head over to the library for a bit, it seems we have work.”

For some reason, her words managed to disperse the tension in the classroom’s air.

“I didn’t hear about this.”

“Sensei told me when I ran into her earlier. Do you have something else to do?”

“Not really.”

“Then let’s go. It’s not like you were going to study anyway, right?”

I thought that was rude of her, but she was right, so I went along with her to the library.

I have no intention of detailing the events in the library, so to put it briefly - she had told a lie. A lie that involved conspiring with the library teacher-in-charge even though there was no need to. There wasn’t any work to be done; I earnestly inquired Sensei about our duties, but she and Sensei just laughed at me, who they had summoned. Despite my immediate attempts to return home, Sensei apologised as she brought out tea and teacakes. Out of consideration for the food, I forgave them.

After a short tea break, we were evicted from the library as it was closing early today. Having reached this stage, I asked for the first time why she had told that meaningless lie. I was sure she must have had a good reason.

“Not really. I just like being mischievous, y’know?”

“This girl…!” I wanted to say it aloud as we made our way to the shoe lockers, but that’d probably have been playing into the hands of someone up to mischief. That was when she stopped her foot mid-air. She jumped lightly over my foot - her eyebrows were raised and she was making a face that showed her heartfelt displeasure.

“It’d be good if you someday get punished like the boy who cried wolf.”

“You see, the gods are properly watching stuff like how my pancreas is goofing up. So don’t you lie now.”

“Though there also isn’t a rule that says you can tell meaningless lies just because your pancreas is goofing up.”

“Eh, is that so? I didn’t know. By the way, has Affable-Classmate-kun had lunch yet?”

“There’s no way I’d have been able to eat. I did get dragged away by you out of the blue.”

To the best of my ability, I tried to make my annoyance apparent through my voice. With that, we had reached the shoe lockers.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll buy something to eat from the supermarket and head home.”

“If you don’t have anything ready right now, then let’s go eat together. My dad and mom aren’t around today, and they only left me money, you see.”

“……”

While changing our shoes, I was thinking of declining her proposal, but truth be told, I didn’t know how to answer. I couldn’t come up with a clear reason to reject her. My true feelings that I felt yesterday, that “I had a little fun” - that too stood in my way.

Having put on her outside shoes, she stood on her tiptoes and groaned as she stretched her body. Today was a little cloudy, so the sun was weaker as compared to yesterday.

“So how about it? I have a place I want to drop by before I die, y’know.”

“……But it’ll be troublesome if we get seen by our classmates again.”

“Ah! That! I remember now!”

I thought her sudden increase in volume was a sign that she had become weird in the head. When I looked, her brows were knitted and she was acting all grumpy.

“Hey, Affable-Classmate-kun, you said you didn’t get along particularly well with me, right? Even though we did when we had fun on the weekend!”

“Yeah, I did say it.”

“I already mentioned it in yesterday’s message. That we should get along until I die.”

“I don’t really know about how it really is, but what I said doesn’t really matter, you know. It’s just that I can’t stand being talked to or questioned by our classmates - I’d much rather have them observe me if that’s all they’re doing.”

“Wouldn’t it be fine even if they didn’t misunderstand? What’s important is how we really are, our substance - even though you said that yesterday.”

“It’s precisely because substance is most important that it doesn’t matter even if they misunderstand.”

“We’re going around in circles huh.”

“Not to mention, I had to prevent news of your illness from getting out, so I told a meaningless lie, just like you. You should be praising me instead of getting angry.”

“Mmmmm!”

She had the face of a child that was thinking too much about something difficult.

“We really do go in different directions, huh.”

“Probably.”

“It’s not just for our eating habits, and the gap seems even wider for this question.”

“Guess it’s just like a political question.”

Somehow, before I knew it, her mood had returned to its original state and she was roaring with laughter. Her simplicity and sprightliness must be two of the reasons why she had many friends.

“So, what about lunch?”

“……I don’t mind going, but is this really fine? That you aren’t having fun with your other friends.”

“There’s no way that I’d make a double booking in my plans, y’know. I already have plans with someone tomorrow. But you’re the only one that knows about my pancreas, so I feel at ease with you.”

“Am I supposed to be like a breather for you?”

“Yup, a breather.”

“Then, for the sake of helping someone out, I guess having lunch is fine.”

“Really? Yay.”

If it was for the sake of a breather, it couldn’t be helped. Even if we were discovered by our classmates and things became troublesome, for the sake of helping someone out, it really couldn’t be helped. Even she needed a place to spill her secrets. That was why it couldn’t be helped.

Yes, I truly was a reed boat.

“Where are we going?”

So I asked, and she, looking up at the sky with narrowed eyes, answered in the midst of what appeared to be a dance.

“Paradise!”

That a place called paradise could possibly exist in a world that would take away the life of a high school girl - I thought it was strange.

I started to regret following her as we entered the store. But even so, I understood how unreasonable it was to blame her. The one at fault was me. Because I’d always avoided contact with other people, and because I’d never been invited out, I didn’t realise that something was amiss. I didn’t know it was possible to find out too late that the other party’s plans differed from my own inclinations. It probably meant that my crisis-management skills were lacking.

“What’s wrong? You’re looking glum.”

The look on her face told me that not only had she noticed my discomfort, it also amused her greatly.

The answer to her question had come together pretty clearly. But since there wasn’t a single thing I could somehow use as an answer, I didn’t say anything. There was nothing I could do but make a lesson of this failure and capitalise on it the next time.

In other words, yes, I wasn’t the type of boy that would rejoice over being misplaced in a fancy and mellow space with no one else but a girl.

“You see, the shortcakes here are really good.”

Since before we entered, I'd found her choice of location just a little bit odd, but I didn't really give it too much thought. Since I'd never came to this sort of place before, I must have let my guard down. But surely, who would have thought that a restaurant which targeted a specific gender as its customer base to this extent existed. When I saw the sales slip that the server left, I found that the box with "male" written beside it had been checked. Whether it was that male patrons were exceptionally rare, or that the prices changed based on gender, I didn't know, but I could understand either way.

If I were to hazard a guess, the type of restaurant we were in now would be a dessert buffet. Its name was "Dessert Paradise". Right now, a fast food restaurant looked much closer to paradise than this.

Reluctantly, I started talking to the grinning girl.

"Hey."

"What's wrong?"

"Stop grinning. Hey, are you trying to get yourself, or even me, overweight? This is the second day in a row we're going to a buffet."

"Neither. I'm just eating what I want to eat."

"I guess that's true. So are you going to eat sweet things until you die today?"

"Exactly. You're okay with dessert, right?"

"I'm no good with fresh cream."

"Such people really exist? Then just eat some chocolate cake. They're really good, and they don't only sell desserts, they have stuff like pasta and curry - even peet-suh too."

"That's really good news, but could you stop pronouncing pizza like that? It makes pizza sound like it smells bad."

"You mean the cheese?"

I was tempted to flick water or something at the nose of that girl who managed to smile so smugly at her own joke. I didn't however want to be a nuisance to others, nor trouble the waiter by making a mess, so I stopped myself. Then again, it wasn't as though I would've done it if we were at the roadside anyway.

It would be annoying to get flustered like she expected, so having reached this point, I put on a front like I had hardened my resolve, and went to get food together with her. Though it was a weekday afternoon, the restaurant was filled with girls from other high schools that had entered their examination period like us. After appropriately getting some carbs, some salad, a Hamburg steak and some fried chicken, I returned to our seats to find her already happily seated down. On top of her plate was a large portion of sweet things. Since I didn't really like the sweetness of western confectioneries, I started to feel a little sick.

"Come to think of it, murder cases are scary, huh."

Some tens of seconds after we began to eat, she brought up that topic.

I was relieved.

"Thank goodness, there wasn't a single person talking about that case today, so I was starting to wonder if it was all just a dream of mine."

"Isn't that because no one's interested? After all, it did happen in the countryside and not many people live there."

"That's a pretty heartless way of putting things, for someone like you."

I thought it was unexpected. It's not like I could say that I knew her, but the girl I imagined would never say something like that.

"But I'm interested though. I properly watched the news, and I even thought, 'ah, I didn't think this person would've died before me,' okay!"

"I'm just asking because of that one in a million chance, but have you ever met that person?"

"Do you think I have?"

"Do you think I think so? Just forget I asked. So what were you saying?"

"Hm, I am interested, but you see, it's probably just that everyone that's living a normal life isn't really interested in stuff like living or dying."

That may be the right view of things. Living life as per normal, living or dying - people that live while conscious about these things are few and far between. That's just how reality is. The only ones who live while thinking about life and death every day are probably philosophers, priests or artists.

Not to mention this girl who's been afflicted by a grave illness, and this person who found out about her secret.

"Speaking of coming face-to-face with death, there's that huh. You start to live every day thinking that you're alive."

"That resonates with my heart more than any other words great men have spoken."

"Right? Haaah, if only everyone else was dying too."

She, who stuck out her tongue, had probably said it jokingly, but I took her words pretty seriously. As is often the case with words, all of their meanings depend on the sensibilities of the listener, not the speaker.

I started eating the conservative serving of tomato pasta on the heart-shaped plate. I was a little troubled but I managed to just barely get by. Thinking about it, having meals and going home are the same. A single bite of food may have a completely different value to her than it would to me.

But of course, it wouldn't be right to say that there was any fundamental difference. Between me, who could die tomorrow due to the whim of a criminal or some other incident, and her, who was to die soon because of her weakening pancreas, there shouldn't have been a gap between the values of our meals. The only ones who could fully grasp that are probably those that have already died.

"Affable-Classmate-kun, do you have any interest in girls?"

The girl that had cream stuck to her nose asked so with a silly face that didn't indicate she had just been discussing life and death. It was amusing, so I didn't comment on it.

"What are you saying all of a sudden?"

"Even though you looked flustered for being brought along to a shop full of girls, you didn't so much as look even when you passed by a cute girl. I noticed it right away, y'know. Are you gay?"

Somehow it seemed like she had noticed I was flustered. I decided to work on my acting abilities. Though it remained to be seen whether I'd make improvements before she died.

"I don't like being in a place where I don't belong. And I also wouldn't do something as ill-mannered as staring at other people."

“So I’m ill-mannered, huh.”

She puffed out her cheeks. Since the tip of her nose remained as it was, her expression became even more amusing. It was an expression that appeared to be specifically meant for showing others.

“Oh no, I’ve really become ill-mannered; Affable-Classmate-kun, you said yesterday that you’ve never had any friends or a girlfriend, so I just sort of assumed that you’ve never liked anyone.”

“I don’t particularly dislike anyone either, so you could just as well say that I like everyone.”

“Yeah yeah, I got it, I got it. So, have you ever liked a girl? Anyone?”

With a sigh, she stuffed her mouth with fried chicken. It seemed like she was gradually getting used to dealing with my nonsense.

“Whatever the circumstances may be, you know what unrequited love is, right?”

“……Unrequited love.”

“Like when your feelings aren’t returned.”

“That much I understand.”

“If you understand, then tell me about it already. Have you ever had an unrequited love?”

I judged that going about this in a pretentious manner would make for even more trouble. I’d be no match for her if she got angry like yesterday.

“Hmm, well, I think there was something like that, just once.”

“That, right there - what kind of girl was she?”

“And why would you want to know that?”

“Because I’m interested - you said yesterday that we were opposites, so I’ve been wondering what kind of person you’d fall for.”

I was considering telling her to just reverse who she was as a person in that case, but as I didn’t want to push my own system of values onto others, I didn’t say it.

“What kind of person, huh. Well, she was the type of person that used ‘san’.”

“……San?”

She furrowed her brows, and her nose shifted. The cream moved along as well.

“Yeah. We were in the same class in middle school. She was a girl that always used ‘san’ without fail. Bookseller-san, Shopkeeper-san, Fishmonger-san. Even for the novelists that appeared in textbooks. Akutagawa-san, Dazai-san, Mishima-san. On top of that, she even used it on food. Like Daikon-san, as she called it. Thinking about it now though, it was probably just a peculiarity - maybe she wasn’t even related to humankind. At the time, I just thought of it as never forgetting to be respectful. Or to put it differently, I thought that she was a gentle and modest person. And so, even more than for anyone else, by just a little bit, I had special feelings for her.”

Having said that in one go, I gulped down a mouthful of water.

“I’m not sure if that counts as unrequited love, though.”

I looked at her. Without saying even a single word, she smiled and ate the fruit-covered cake that was on her plate. Her smile deepened as she chewed, and while I was wondering what was wrong, she scratched her cheek as she looked back up at me.

“What’s wrong?”

“Naaah.”

She was fidgeting about.

“It’s just that, you see, it was even more wonderful than I thought it’d be, so I’m a little embarrassed.”

“……Aah, yeah, maybe she was a wonderful girl.”

“It’s not that, I meant your reason for liking her.”

I couldn’t think of a good response, so I imitated her and brought the Hamburg steak on the plate into my mouth. This was delicious too. Seemingly happy, with a smile rather than a smirk, she was looking at me.

“So what happened to that love? But that’s right, you’ve never had a girlfriend, huh.”

“Yeah. You see, that girl apparently had an appearance that looked cute to the average person too, so it happened that she was going out with a cheerful and cool popular guy in the class.”

“Hmm, guess she doesn’t have an eye for people.”

“What do you mean?”

“Naaah, don’t mind it. I see, so even you were once a pure boy with a fleeting love, huh!”

“So, I’m just asking out of courtesy, but what about you?”

“I guess I’ve had three boyfriends up till now. But just so you know, I was serious about all of them. There are quite a few people out there that say love in middle school is just fun and games, but I think those people are just fools that aren’t responsible in their own love for others.”

Her manner of speaking and facial expressions were both inflamed with passion, and her breath closed in on me. I moved back a little. I wasn’t good with heat.

Incidentally, with her looks, it was quite believable that she’s had three boyfriends before. She didn’t wear much makeup, and while she wasn’t a head-turning beauty, her facial features were dignified.

“Hey, don’t pull away.”

“I’m not pulling away, but I think there’s a little cream on your nose?”

“Huh?” The girl who didn’t understand made an utterly silly face. If it was that face, maybe she wouldn’t have had any boyfriends. After a while, she finally noticed it and hurriedly wiped her nose with a wet wipe. Before the cream on top of her nose disappeared, I stood up from my seat. My plate was already empty.

I got myself a new plate, intending to get something sweet this time. But just as I was about to move deeper into the store, to my good fortune, I

spotted my favourite *warabi-mochi*, so I decided to appropriate some of the brown sugar syrup that sat beside the plates. After snapping out of my captivation with the art-like oozing of the brown sugar syrup, I poured myself a cup of coffee.

While deliberating on how to deal with the girl when she was in a bad mood, I slipped through the spaces within the crowd of high school girls to return to our table. Contrary to my expectations, she was in high spirits.

However, I was unable to take my place at the same seat I had been using up till just now.

Her smile deepened as she saw me nearing the table.

Probably having noticed her expression, the person sitting on the seat that should have been mine looked my way. The surprise she felt quickly made itself apparent on her face. As for me, I felt like she was someone I had seen before.

“Sa-Sakura, and, is that, Gloomy-Looking-Classmate-kun?”

I finally remembered just who that girl - who seemed even more indomitable than her - was. If I wasn’t mistaken, she was the girl who tagged along with her rather often. And if I remembered correctly, she was part of some sports club.

“Yup, Kyouko, why are you so surprised? Ah, Affable-Classmate-kun, this girl is my best friend, Kyouko.”

The smiling girl, her confused friend, and the cautious me who carried a plate and a cup. While I lamented in my heart that things would probably become troublesome again, I placed the cup and the *warabi-mochi* on the table, and sat down on an empty seat for now. For better or for worse, she and I had been shown to a table for four. From between the two girls that sat across each other, I was able to see the both of them without any conscious effort.

“Huh? Sakura, you mean, you get along with Gloomy-Looking-Classmate-kun?”

“Yeah, I already told Rika when she asked - that we got along.”

She smiled at me a little. Her best friend seemed to grow even more confused because of her smile.

“But, I heard from Rika that you were just joking?”

“Gah, that was just Affable-Classmate-kun being misleading because he didn’t want to be bothered. I can’t believe that Rika believed him over me - just where has our friendship gone?”

Best-Friend-san didn’t laugh at the words she’d said in jest. Instead, she shot me a questioning glance. Since my eyes had accidentally met hers, I nodded my head slightly. She returned the nod. I thought that was the end of it, but as expected of that best friend of hers, she didn’t let me off with just a nod.

“Hey hey, have I ever talked to Gloomy-Looking-Classmate-kun before?”

Thinking about it, it was a rude question, but it didn’t seem like she harboured any ill will. Though even if she did, I didn’t want to create a bad atmosphere.

“We’ve spoken before. When I was manning the library counter, you told me she wasn’t able to come or something like that.”

Having heard that, the girl started to roar with laugher. “Don’t call something like that talking,” she interjected.

“That’s just how you view it,” I thought to myself, but even the concerned person’s supposed Best-Friend-san muttered, “I wouldn’t call that talking either.” Well, to me and to Best-Friend-san, whatever it was, was a non-issue.

“Is this okay Kyouko? Aren’t your friends waiting for you at your seat?”

“Ah, yeah, it’s about time I go. Hey, Sakura, it’s not like I have any objections or anything, I’m just asking.”

Best-Friend-san stared at her face, only looking at my face just once.

“This is the second day in a row, and not to mention, it’s just the two of you in a place that’s full of girls and couples. When you said that the two of you get along, did you mean it in that way?”

“Nope.”

Since she had so confidently refuted her, I swallowed the denial that lay at the tip of my tongue. I couldn’t say that I liked this situation with the two of them getting worked up.

Right after letting loose a relieved expression, Best-Friend-san immediately scrunched her face in dubiousness, and looked right back at me.

“So, what are the two of you? Friends?”

“I already told you, we get along.”

“That’s enough from you Sakura, since you tend not to talk sense sometimes. Gloomy-Looking-Classmate-kun, is it right to say that you’re only friends with Sakura?”

I guess only a best friend could understand her that well. I thought about how to deflect the stray bullet that had inexplicably locked onto me, and gave the most suitable reply I could muster.

“I guess we get along.”

I looked at both their faces simultaneously. One was drained and appalled, while the other was grinning from ear to ear.

Best-Friend-san gave an audible sigh. Then, with a renewed vigour, spat out, “I’ll definitely get to the bottom of this tomorrow,” waved goodbye only to her, and left.

I wondered whether tomorrow’s plans with a friend were plans with that person, and I was pleased that it was not me, but her, that would come under fire. As for the stares from my classmates that I would receive from tomorrow onwards, I’d already given up. If there wasn’t any real harm, all I had to do was turn a blind eye to it.

“Wow, who’d have thought that we’d run into Kyouko?”

Saying those words filled with equal parts surprise and delight, she took one of my *warabi-mochi*, and wilfully put it in her mouth.

“I met Kyouko when I was in middle school, you see. She’s been bold like that since the very beginning, so I thought that she was a scary girl, but we got along as soon as we started talking. She’s a good girl, Get-Along-kun, so please get along with her too.”

“……Is it fine not to tell your best friend about your illness?”

So I said, knowing that I was raining on her parade. The girl’s heart that was coloured with positive emotions would probably turn white in a

moment. Then again, it wasn’t as though I said it because I enjoyed hurting her.

It’s just that I wondered if it were really fine for her to spend her little remaining time being honest with only someone like me - that was the meaning behind my question to her. Was there really no value in spending her final days with a best friend that was so much more precious to her as compared to someone like me? Unusually for me, those were words of consideration and compassion.

“It’s fine, it’s fine! That girl is pretty emotional, so if I told her, she’d definitely cry every time we met. Spending time like that wouldn’t be very fun, right? So for my own sake, I’ve decided to hide it from everyone else till the very last minute.”

And thus with her words and expression, she had wilfully repelled the torrent I had summoned upon her. They were more than enough to leave me speechless.

There was just one last thing. Witnessing her willpower had caused the question lurking within my heart since yesterday to surface - it wouldn’t do if I didn’t ask her that at the very least.

“Hey.”

“Hm? What’s up?”

“Are you really going to die?”

Her determined expression disappeared instantaneously. I immediately regretted my decision, but I didn’t have the time to let my remorse linger - she quickly regained her expression, and as always, it went round and round, changing dramatically.

At first she smiled. Then her face turned into one of frustration. Then a bitter smile. Then it was anger, sorrow, and back to frustration. At last, she looked me straight in the eye and smiled.

“I’ll die.”

“……I see.”

Her smile deepened as she blinked even more than usual.

“I’m going to die. I’ve already known that for many years. Thanks to advances in medical science, most of my symptoms aren’t visible on the outside, and my life expectancy has increased. But, I’ll die. They’re saying that they don’t even know if I have a year left.”

Even though I didn’t especially want to know or hear it, her voice resounded clearly in my ears.

“I can’t tell anyone but Get-Along-kun. You must be the only person that can give me both the truth and an everyday life. My doctor can’t give me anything but the truth. My family overreacts to every single one of my remarks, and they’ve become desperate trying to keep up appearances in my everyday life. I think my friends will definitely be the same if they found out. You’re the only one that can live an everyday life with me while knowing the truth, so it’s fun to be with you.”

It felt like I had been stabbed deep in my heart by a needle. I knew that I provided her with nothing like that. If - just if - I had to say that I provided her with anything, it was probably nothing but an escape.

“I said it yesterday too, but you’re overestimating me.”

“Even more than that, I guess we really do look like a couple, huh?”

“……What are you trying to say?”

“Nothing in particular.”

As I thought, the girl that stuffed her cheeks with chocolate cake that she had so appetisingly pierced with a fork didn’t look like a human being that was soon to die.

I realised it.

Not one human being looks like they will someday die. Even me, even the person that was killed by the criminal, even her, we were all alive yesterday. We lived without behaving like we were going to die. I see - that may be why the value of today was the same for everybody.

While I was in the middle of thinking, she admonished me.

“Don’t make such a serious face, you’re going to die in the end anyway. Let’s meet in heaven.”

“……That’s true huh.”

That was right, getting sentimental about her life would just be conceited of me. It would be arrogant to believe that there was no way I could die before her.

“That’s why you should strive to be virtuous like me.”

“That’s right, after you die, I should go become a follower of Buddha or something.”

“You say after I die, but if you get involved with another woman I’ll never forgive you!”

“Sorry, I was just joking with you.”

She gave her usual, hearty roar of laughter.

We stuffed ourselves till we were full. Having paid our respective bills, we left the restaurant and started to head home for the day. Since there was a little distance to walk from school to Dessert Paradise, I had originally intended to ride my bike, but because of the time it would’ve taken to get my bike from home, as well as the suggestion of that girl to spare the effort, we had walked here to have our meals, still in our uniforms.

The two of us trotted home on a sidewalk along a national highway, simultaneously bathing in the light of the sun that was no longer directly above us.

“Isn’t the heat good too? Since this may be my last summer, I have to enjoy it all I can. I wonder what we should do next. What’s the first thing that comes to mind when you hear ‘summer’?”

“I guess that’d be a watermelon popsicle.”

She laughed. She was always in the mood for laughing.

“Something other than watermelon popsicles?” She continued, “Anything else?”

“Shaved ice.”

“They’re both ice!”

“Then what do you think of when you hear ‘summer’?”

“For me, it’s definitely stuff like the sea, fireworks, festivals, and not to mention, a single summer’s adventure!”

“You’re even going to find gold?”

“Gold? Why?”

“When you say 'adventure,’ you mean going on a journey, right?”

She sighed melodramatically, shaking her head with the palms of both her hands facing up. It was probably a gesture to show her dismay, or perhaps even an action to signal annoyance.

“It’s not just a journey. Come on, summer, adventure, you get it right?”

“So like waking up early to search for beetles.”

“I got it - Get-Along-kun is a dummy.”

“It’s dumber to let love rule your head whenever a particular season arrives.”

“So you do understand! Gah!”

Being stared down as sweat dripped down my face, I inadvertently looked away.

“It’s hot so don’t make things more troublesome than they have to be, okay?”

“Weren’t you the one that said the heat was good too?”

“A single summer’s fleeting love. A single summer’s mistake - since I’m already a high school girl, I think it’d be nice to experience those kinds of things once or twice.”

The fleeting stuff aside, making a mistake probably wouldn’t be good.

“I’m alive, so it wouldn’t do not to fall in love.”

“You’ve already had three boyfriends in your lifetime, isn’t that enough?”

“Hey now, the heart isn’t something that speaks in numbers.”

“That seems deep at first glance, but if you think about it properly, those words don’t really make sense. To put it simply, you just still feel like making boyfriends.”

I’d said those words with little thought to them, so I thought that she would have just made another joke in return, but I was wrong.

She came to a halt as though she had suddenly thought of something. I, who wasn’t given advance notice, continued to propel myself another five steps or so before finally deciding to investigate the meaning behind her actions. While I wondered whether she had found a hundred yen coin, the girl that remained rooted to the spot stared at me. She held her arms behind as her long hair fluttered in the breeze.

“What’s wrong?”

“……If I said that I felt like making a boyfriend, would you do all you could to help me?”

She looked at me with a face like she was carrying out an experiment. It seemed like she was forcing a profound expression.

The meaning of her expression, and the meaning of her words too - I, who was poor at human relations, couldn’t really understand them.

“Doing everything I can to help you - how so?”

“……Nah, it’s fine.”

The girl shook her head and began to walk once again. I stole a glance at her face as she returned to my side; her complicated expression had cleanly reset into a smile, making me all the more confounded as to what her intentions were.

“Could this be some joke about introducing your friends to me or something?”

“Nope.”

Even though I thought there could be no other conjecture, I was swiftly denied.

“Then, just what are you-”

“I told you it’s fine. This isn’t a novel, so it’d be a big mistake to think that every one of my remarks means something. There isn’t really any meaning to it. Get-Along-kun, you need to have more contact with humans.”

“……Is that so.”

It came to the point that I was forced to comply. I couldn’t tell her that it was weird to plainly deny any meaning if there wasn’t any. It was because of my reed boat mentality. She had an air around her that indicated she didn’t want to continue the conversation beyond that topic – that was what I felt. But after all, since this was based on the sensibilities of someone unfamiliar with humans, it was uncertain how reliable it was.

At a fork in the road close to school, she waved her hand and loudly proclaimed:

“Alright then, I’ll let you know when I decide on our next date!”

Choosing not to pursue the matter of her having decreed my unconditional and ignorant participation in her plans, I turned my back to her waving hand. Perhaps, I had already adopted the mindset of licking the plate clean after having tasted the poison.

I thought about it even after we parted ways, but in the end, I still couldn’t understand her words and her expression from that time.

It was probably something I wouldn’t understand till I died.

4

The ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ is, in essence, her will - that is what I believe. In that unused paperback, she writes about the everyday things she sees and feels, leaving them behind. Evidently, it seemed that this method of recording had rules unique to her.

I couldn’t say I knew any for certain, but was fairly sure of a few that I had observed. Firstly, she wasn’t simply recording her day-to-day experiences. Days where she saw something special, days where she felt something special - within the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’, she compiled only things that were of value in leaving behind after her own death.

Secondly, she chose not to leave behind non-textual information in the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’. It seemed she thought that things like drawings or graphs didn’t fit in a paperback, choosing to only write with a black ball pen on the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’.

Lastly, she decided that she wouldn’t show anyone the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ until she died. With the exception of me, having seen the very first page due even more so to a force majeure than a blunder on her part, no one else had seen her life’s records. It seems that she had told her parents to release it to all her loved ones after her death. Whatever its present purpose, those around her would receive her message after she died, thus making it something akin to her will.

But even though nobody should have been able to influence those records or be affected by them until she died, just once, I had given her my opinion on the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’.

It was regarding my name - I didn’t want it to appear in the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’. It was simply because I didn’t want to receive any unnecessary scrutiny or criticism from her parents and friends after her death. In the midst of our library committee work, she had made a remark regarding the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ that “various people appear inside”. It was then that I formally requested the omission of my name. Her answer - “I’m the one writing it so that’s up to me.” I swallowed whatever more words I had. “If you say you don’t like it, it makes me want to do it even more,” she added. I resigned myself to the trouble that would ensue after my classmate’s death.

With that said, my name had probably already been written down together with the episodes involving yakinku and dessert, but for the two days after we had gone to Dessert Paradise, my name shouldn't have appeared in the 'Disease Coexistence Journal'.

The reason was that in those two days, I hadn't exchanged a single word with her at school. It wasn't unusual or anything, since we had always done our own thing in class. Instead, it could be said that those days adorned by yakiniku and desserts were the irregular ones.

I had attended school, taken tests, and returned home quietly. Though I often felt the stares of her best friend and those from that group, I determined that there was no need for me to go out of my way to be affected by them.

Nothing truly special had happened in those two days. If I were forced to pick something, there were only two minor incidents, the first of which - while I was silently sweeping the corridor, a boy that normally didn't even so much as look at me had come to talk to me.

"Yo, Plain-Classmate, are ya dating Yamauchi?"

His rather inelegant manner of speaking had a sort of freshness to it. I suspected that it may have been the case that he carried some affection for her, and in turn was illogically angry at me, but his appearance suggested otherwise. Judging by the look on his face, he wasn't the slightest bit upset, in fact, there was some air of misplaced glee about him. He must have been one of those frivolous people that were like bundles of curiosity.

"No, absolutely not."

"That so? But the both of ya had dessert, right?"

"We just happened to have a meal together."

"What's with that?"

"Why are you interested?"

"Hm? Ah, don't tell me ya think I like Yamauchi? No way! Look, I like girls that are more refined."

Even though I didn't ask, he continued to blabber on nonchalantly. It seemed that the only thing we could agree on was that she wasn't refined.

“I see, so we had the wrong idea, but everyone in class is buzzing ‘bout it ya know.”

“It’s all a misunderstanding, so I don’t mind it.”

“How mature, ya want some gum?”

“Not really. Could you hold the dustpan for me?”

“Leave it to me.”

He was flaky and always skipped out on cleaning duty, so I thought he’d turn me down. But contrary to expectations, he helpfully held onto the dustpan for me. Perhaps he didn’t understand the concept of clean-up time, and had someone taught him, he’d have been willing to do it properly.

He didn’t pursue the matter any further than that. This was the first incident that happened within those two days that I found to be irregular.

Having a conversation with a classmate wasn’t that unpleasant, but while the next irregularity was trivial, it had put me into somewhat of a melancholic mood. The bookmark that should have been sandwiched within my paperback had gone missing. Though I fortunately remembered the scene I had read up to, it wasn’t something that was distributed for free at bookshops and the like; it was something made of thin plastic that I had bought when I went to the museum previously. I didn’t know when it had gone missing, but in any case, even though I wasn’t the least bit bitter that my own carelessness was the root cause, I felt down for the first time in a while.

However, despite feeling down about something that was ultimately superficial, those two days were normal for me. And since the norm for me was tranquillity - that meant I hadn’t been haunted by the girl who was close to death.

The beginning of regularity’s end began on Wednesday night. I was enjoying the last of “normalcy” when I received a single message.

No matter how much I hoped and wished, nothing could change the fact that at that time, I hadn’t noticed the signs of abnormality beginning - it was probably because I was a character. Even in novels, the only ones that knew the setting of the first chapter were the readers. The characters themselves don’t know a single thing.

The message’s contents were as such:

“Good job with the tests! We’re getting a day off from the tests tomorrow, aren’t we? [smiley face] To get right to the point, will you be free? You’ll be free anyway right? I’m thinking of going on a trip on the train! [peace sign] Anywhere you want to go?”

Her making assumptions about people’s circumstances sort of ruined my mood, but she had hit the bull’s-eye when she said I was free, and I didn’t have any reason to turn her down, so I replied, “I’m fine with going anywhere you want to go to before you die.”

Of course, this would later come back to bite me in the neck. I simply should have known better than to leave the decision-making to her.

And so, the message specifying the place and time soon followed. The rendezvous point was a large and prominent train station within the prefecture, and the time was peculiarly early, but I wrote it off as just another one of her many whims.

I replied with a message containing just two characters, and she responded with the last message I received that day.

“You absolutely can’t break this promise okay?”

No matter how much we opposed each other, I fundamentally never broke promises, so I replied with a final “alright” and left my cellphone on my desk.

As a spoiler, the word “promise” was the crux of the girl’s trick. Actually, perhaps it was only I who had interpreted it as a trick. I’d thought that the “promise” she mentioned referred to our outing tomorrow. I was wrong. Her “promise” referred to my slip of the tongue - “I’m fine with going anywhere you want to go to before you die.”

The next day, I headed to our meeting place early in the morning and found her already waiting there. She was carrying a sky blue backpack that she usually didn’t bring along, and wearing a straw hat that she usually didn’t put on - she looked as though she were leaving on a journey.

Before we even exchanged greetings, she expressed her shock at my appearance.

“You’re dressed too lightly! Is that all you’re carrying? What about your change of clothes?”

“……Change of clothes?”

“Hmm, well, I guess you can just buy some over there. Seems like there’ll be a Uniqlo.”

“Over there? Uniqlo?”

That was the first time I felt signs of unease in my heart.

Treating my misgivings and questions like wind to her ears, she looked at her watch and responded with the question - “have you eaten breakfast?”

“It wasn’t very filling, but I had bread.”

“I haven’t eaten. Is it fine if we get something?”

I thought that there wasn’t any particular issue with that, so I assented. She grinned and started to head towards her destination in large strides. I had assumed that we were headed to a convenience store, but we arrived at a bento store instead.

“Huh, you’re getting a railway bento?”

“Yeah, it’s for eating on the Shinkansen. Are you getting one too?”

“Wait wait wait wait wait.”

I grabbed the upper arm of the girl that was happily admiring the bentos lined up on the display, and pulled her away from the cashier. The granny at the register had been smiling pleasantly as she glanced at the girl, but when their eyes met a second time, the girl wore a shocked expression, giving the granny a shock too.

“That should be my expression.”

“What’s wrong?

“Shinkansen? Railway bento? Explain properly - what exactly are we doing today?”

“Like I said, we’re going on a trip on the train.”

“So by ‘train’, you meant the Shinkansen? And when you say 'trip’, just how far do you mean for us to go?”

After making a face that said she finally remembered something, she plunged her hand into her pocket and took out two rectangular pieces of paper. I immediately recognised that they were tickets.

She passed me one, and after taking a look at it, my eyes spread wide open.

“Um, is this a joke?”

She chortled. It seemed like she was serious.

“It says we’re not going somewhere for a day trip, so it seems like we can still rethink this.”

“……No, no, Get-Along-kun, you got it wrong.”

“What a relief, so it really was a joke.”

“That’s not it, we’re not going for just a day trip.”

“……Huh?”

The futility of the entire exercise aside, our conversation from this point on flowed in such a way that I ended up overpowered. For the sake of convenience, a large part of it has hence been omitted.

She asserted herself, and while I tried to persuade her otherwise, she played her trump card - yesterday’s messages. Thus exploited was my intention to never break a promise.

Before I realised it, I was already riding on the Shinkansen.

“Haaah.”

While staring at the flowing scenery from the window seat, I was lost on whether I should accept being thrust into the present situation. Beside me, the girl was enjoying her mixed rice.

“This is my first time going on a trip like this! Get-Along-kun, have you done anything like this before?”

“Nope.”

“You can relax y’know, since I’ve properly prepared travel magazines for today.”

“Ah, is that so.”

Even reed boats should have a limit somewhere; I frowned at myself.

Incidentally, just like the yakiniku, the money for the Shinkansen tickets came from her purse. She told me not to mind, but it wouldn’t do not to repay her, even if it was at the cost of the dignity of a human like me.

While wondering whether it was time to get a part-time job, an orange was shoved right before my eyes.

“Want some?”

“……Thanks.”

I received the orange and quietly began peeling its skin.

“You’ve got no energy at all, huh. Don’t tell me you feel like getting off?”

“No, I’m staying on board. For your plans, and the Shinkansen too. And I’m reflecting on my decision to do so.”

“What a downer, you’ve got to be more cheery when travelling!”

“Though it seems more like an abduction than a trip to me.”

“If you’re going to keep looking back on yourself, you should just look at me instead.”

“And exactly what do you mean by saying that?”

Once again treating my words like the wind, she closed the lid on the railway bento she was done with, and tied a rubber band around it. Her nimble hand movements gave off the impression that she was a perfectly alive human being.

I discouraged myself from putting into words the contrast between the sense of reality she emanated and the actual reality, and proceeded to silently eat the orange one wedge at a time. She had bought the oranges from a kiosk, but they were unexpectedly sweet and succulent. I took a look outside and saw the rural landscape spread out into the distance - a scene which I normally wouldn’t have seen. I spotted a scarecrow in the field, and for some reason, that made me resign myself to the fact that there was no longer any point in resisting.

“By the way, Get-Along-kun, what’s your first name?”

It was a sudden question from the girl comparing local specialties in her travel magazine next to me. Looking at the greenery of the mountains had calmed me down, so I responded to her query straightforwardly. Even though my name wasn’t even that unusual, she was nodding her head with great interest. Following which, she whispered my full name to herself.

“Wasn’t there a novelist with a name like yours?”

“That’s right, though I don’t know which one you thought of.”

Using my own first and last names as a base, two authors came to mind.

“Could this be the reason you like novels?”

“That’s not far off the truth. I did start reading because of that, but I like books because I think they’re interesting.”

“Hmmm, so you have the same name as your favourite author?”

“Nope. My favourite is Osamu Dazai.”

Seemingly somewhat surprised at hearing the name of a literary master, her eyes spread wide open.

“By Osamu Dazai, you mean the one that wrote 'No Longer Human’?”

“That’s right.”

“So you like gloomy books like that, huh.”

“It’s true that Osamu Dazai’s brooding nature comes through the atmosphere of his books, but words can’t be dismissed just because they’re gloomy you know.”

It was rare of me to be speaking so enthusiastically, but she responded with a pout, seemingly disinterested.

“Hmm, well, guess it just doesn’t engage me.”

“Looks like you aren’t really interested in literature, huh.”

“Yeah, not really. I read manga though.”

Just like I had expected. It wasn't a matter of good or bad, I just couldn't imagine her patiently reading a novel. Even for manga, if she was at home, she'd probably be reading it while loafing around her room and making noises at every little thing.

It couldn't be helped that my conversation partner wasn't interested in what I had to say, so I asked her something that I was curious about.

"Seems like your parents are pretty okay with you travelling. What did you do?"

"I told them that I was travelling with Kyouko. If I told my parents that I had one last thing I wanted to do, they'd most likely agree to it in tears, but as expected of travelling with a boy - I can't tell how they'd react."

"You're really horrible huh - trampling on your parents' feelings."

"Speaking of which, what about you? What sort of excuse did you give your parents?"

"Since I didn't want to worry my parents, I've been lying to them about having friends. So I told them that I was staying at a friend's house."

"That's horrible, but how lonesome."

"But couldn't you say that no one got hurt?"

She shook her head in dismay and proceeded to retrieve another magazine from the backpack placed next to her feet. What an attitude for the culprit who had forced me to lie to the parents I loved. Seeing that she had engrossed herself with her magazine, I seized the opportunity to conjure a paperback from my sling bag, and began to focus on that instead. Worn out by the extraordinary amount of noise she had been making since morning, I wanted nothing but to surrender myself to the story and let my heart be healed.

While thinking about things like that, it suddenly dawned upon me that I was practically tempting fate to let her disrupt my peace; it was a certain someone's fault that I had become completely paranoid. Thankfully, my precious time passed without any disturbances. I concentrated on my novel for close to an hour before I reached a good place to stop. It was then that I suddenly became aware of the peace I had managed - but never expected - to grasp. I looked to my side to see the girl soundly asleep, magazine resting on her stomach.

She didn’t wake for the rest of the trip. Not even after the Shinkansen had arrived at our station.

If I had to say it, it looked as though her short life had ended on the Shinkansen, but the truth was that she was simply impossibly hard to awaken - it wasn’t an omen, and it wasn’t really a misunderstanding either. I gently poked her cheeks and pinched her nose, but she just groggily moved away and made no signs of waking up. As a last resort, I shot a rubber band in my possession at the back of her defenceless hand - she jumped out of her seat in an overreaction.

“You could’ve just called me awake or something!” She said as she punched me in the shoulder. Even though I had went through all the trouble to wake her up - unbelievable.

“Our first landing! Waaah! I can smell ramen!”

“Isn’t that just as expected of your imagination?”

“I definitely smell it! Isn’t it your nose that’s rotten?”

“I’m just grateful that my brain isn’t rotten like yours.”

“It’s my pancreas that’s rotten though.”

“I’m a coward, so let’s ban that deathblow from now on. It’s not fair.”

While laughing, she said, “What if we made Get-Along-kun a deathblow too?” But I didn’t have any plans to contract a serious illness in the near future, so I politely turned her down.

We took a long escalator down from the platform to a floor where the souvenir shop and the rest area were located. The space seemed to have been newly renovated - it got full marks for cleanliness and left me with a favourable impression.

We took another escalator to get to the ground floor, and we finally reached the ticket gates. An unexpected sensation assaulted me the moment I stepped out, so much so that I doubted my own senses. Like she had said earlier, I could smell ramen. Amazing - perhaps it really was true then, that he in the urban prefectures could smell sauce, while he in the rural prefectures could smell udon. I’d never been to either, so I couldn’t deny the possibility, but who would have thought that a single dish could permeate the everyday lives of humans to this extent?

Even without looking at the face of the girl standing beside me, I knew that she was definitely snickering at me, so I absolutely refused to look.

“So, where are we going?”

“Hehehehehehehehe, huh?”

How annoying.

“Ah, where are we going? We’re going to meet the God of Studies. But before that, we’re getting lunch.”

Speaking of which, my stomach did feel empty.

“As I thought, it’s gotta be ramen, how about it?”

“No objections.”

Amidst the bustle of the station, I traced her large strides at my own comfortable pace. We were apparently headed for some shop she had read about in the magazine while on the Shinkansen. Her gait showed neither sign of pause nor hesitation. We descended underground, exiting the station into an underground street, and found ourselves standing in front of the ramen store far sooner than expected. As we neared the store, its distinctive scent of broth thickened, and though I wasn’t really put off, there were copies of a page from a famous gourmet manga promoting this shop plastered onto its outer wall. However, it didn’t seem to be a weird shop, so I was relieved.

The ramen was delicious. The food arrived quickly upon our orders, and we quickly began to stuff ourselves. The both of us had chosen to get an extra set of noodles, and when we were asked how hard we wanted our noodles to be, I heard her say “steel beam”; I politely followed suit. To think there was such a classification for the level of hardness - it would be best if no one ever found out about this matter, for it made me red with shame. Incidentally, “harigane” was probably created by boiling the noodles for a shorter duration of time.

Reinvigorated by the hearty meal, we quickly got on our next train. There was no need to rush, since the shrine of the God of Studies she had wanted to meet was about thirty minutes away by train, but as the leader of our expedition had demanded we hurry, I simply followed suit.

While sitting on the train, I remembered a report that I had read somewhere, and I parted my sealed lips.

“It seems like this prefecture is rather unsafe, so it’s best to be careful. Shooting incidents and the like are apparently quite common.”

“Is that so? But isn’t it the same with any prefecture? Haven’t you heard about that murder case in the neighbouring prefecture that happened the other day?”

“I haven’t been watching the news lately though.”

“Someone from the police said it on TV, but it seems like perpetrators of random attacks are the hardest to catch. Like they say, the devil’s children have the devil’s luck!”

“Though that shouldn’t be the main takeaway from this story.”

“That must be why you’re going to continue living and I’m going to die.”

“I’ve only just learnt this now, but proverbs can’t be trusted. I’ll remember that.”

It really did take the train thirty minutes to ferry us to our destination. The sky was so sunny it was getting on my nerves; just by standing around, I was starting to get soaked in sweat. I wondered if I would really be alright without a change of clothes, but it seemed that our next stop would be close to a Uniqlo.

“What great weather!”

With a smile that rivalled the sun, she climbed the slope up to the shrine with light steps. The slope to the precinct was crowded despite it being a weekday afternoon. On both sides of the street, there were stores selling all manners of souvenirs, sundries, food, and even the odd suspicious-looking T-shirt - it truly was a sight to behold. A store selling specialty mochi especially caught my eye, and the sweet fragrance it emanated tickled my nasal cavity.

From time to time, the teetering girl would get pulled into a store, but in the end, we didn’t buy a single thing. Fortunately for us, the store attendants were understanding, and I was able to enjoy just looking at the items in peace.

Having finally reached the end of the slope - now drenched in sweat - we headed straight for the first vending machine in sight. It was frustrating to lose to a vending machine, especially one deliberately installed in such an

exquisite location to take advantage of thirsty passers-by, but there was no resisting a life-preserving instinct.

Whipping her sweat-soaked hair from side to side, she was smiling as always.

“Feels like we’re really in the springtime of life!”

“The grass may still be green, but it’s not spring…… It’s hot.”

“Have you ever been in any sports clubs?”

“Nope. You see, I’m of noble birth, so it’s fine even if I don’t move my body.”

“Don’t insult those of noble birth. You should exercise more, you’re sweating as much as I am, and I’m sick.”

“But that doesn’t have anything to do with my lack of exercise.”

Even the people around us had reached the limit of their stamina - many sat shamelessly in the umbrage of nearby trees. It seemed like today was another especially hot day.

Somehow overcoming our dehydration, we slipped away from the other youth, and resumed our journey. We washed our hands, placed them upon the burning hot statue of a cow, crossed a bridge as we watched the turtles float on the water, and at long last, we arrived before the god. As for why we came across a cow on the way, I remembered reading an explanation for it, but the tepid heat had caused me to forget. She, on the other hand, never seemed intent on reading it.

We stood in front of the box that acted as the god’s wallet, and tossed in a small amount of money as an offering. Then we properly made our prayers - bowing twice, clapping twice, and bowing once more.

I had learnt from somewhere that shrine visits weren’t actually the time to make wishes of gods. They were originally meant as an expression of one’s determination before the gods. But right now, I couldn’t muster any sort of determination. Since nothing could be done about it, I thought I’d give the girl beside me some help. Feigning ignorance, I made a wish to the god.

May her pancreas be healed.

Only when I was done did I realise I had prayed for even longer than her. Surely, wishes that we know won’t come true were easier to pray for.

Perhaps she had actually wished for something different from me. I didn't feel the need to ask her. Prayers were something that should be offered in silence, alone.

"I wished to be lively until I died. Get-Along-kun, what about you?"

"……You're always trampling on my intentions huh."

"Huh, don't tell me you wished for me to slowly get weaker? You're the worst! I was wrong about you!"

"And why would I wish for someone else's misfortune?"

The truth was that I had wished for the complete opposite of what she had speculated, but I didn't tell her. Speaking of which, wasn't this the God of Studies? Well, it was a god, so it probably didn't bother about the details.

"Hey, let's go draw our fortunes!"

I furrowed my brow at her suggestion. I had considered fortune slips to have no connection to her fate. Predictions about the future were written on them, but that girl didn't have a future.

She rushed to the spot where the fortune slips were being sold, confidently deposited a hundred yen into the box, and drew a fortune. It couldn't be helped, so I followed along.

"The one with the better fortune wins!"

"Just what do you think fortune slips are?"

"Ah, I got a Great Blessing."

She was grinning from ear to ear. Inside my heart, I was dumbfounded. Just what did the gods think of this girl? With this, it was proven that fortune slips didn't carry any sort of power at all. Or perhaps, it was actually an act of kindness from the gods to the girl who had already drawn an extraordinarily great curse.

She raised her voice.

"Ahahahahahahahahahahaha! Look, look! It says 'your disease will be healed soon'! There's no way it'll be healed!"

"…Just what about this are you enjoying?"

“What’d you get?”

“Blessing.”

“So it’s lesser than a Small Blessing?”

“Though there are also those that say it’s just lesser than a Great Blessing.”

“Whichever way it is, it’s my win, hehe.”

“Just what about this are you enjoying?”

“Wow, yours says that you’ll meet a good match in love, how nice.”

“If you really think it’s great, don’t say it so contemptuously.”

She slanted her slim neck, and brought her face into point-blank range of mine, a smirk plastered across her face. “Even though I would say she was cute if I had to,” I ended up thinking - my greatest blunder yet.

I looked the other way, and I heard her cackling. She didn’t say a word once her laughter stopped.

We left the inner shrine and headed back the way we came from. But instead of crossing the bridge from earlier, we turned left, coming across the treasure house as well as a pool named the Iris Pond. There were plenty of turtles floating about on the water, for which we went to buy food pellets to scatter into the water. Looking at the laid-back movements of the turtles, I got a little distracted from the heat. I broke out of my daze with the quiet realisation that she had begun talking with a little girl. I looked at her smiling face and thought, “As expected of a human who is the opposite of me.” The girl asked, “Big sis, is he your boyfriend?” And she replied, “Nope, we just get along!” Her response confused the young girl.

Once we were done feeding the turtles, we walked the path along the pool and came across an eatery. At her suggestion, we popped in. The store was outfitted with an air-conditioner and we sighed on reflex at the respite it provided. The spacious store had three other groups of customers apart from us. There was a family, a classy elderly couple, and a group of four aunties who were heartily engaged in raucous chatter. We sat down at the table by the window.

Soon, a gentle-looking granny arrived with two cups of water, and took our orders.

“Two *umegae-mochi*, and I guess I’ll get tea. Are you fine with tea too?”

I nodded, and the granny smiled as she left for the back of the shop.

I drank the cold water, and felt my body temperature steadily decrease. It was a relief to feel the chill spread to my fingertips.

“That confection - you called it *umegae-mochi*, right?”

“It’s a specialty. It was listed on the magazine.”

“Sorry for the wait!” And before I could assert that we hadn’t waited at all, two red plates of *umegae-mochi* and two cups of green tea had been placed on our table. Since we had to make payment upfront, the two of us split the bill in half and handed our coins to the store attendant.

I picked up the round white mochi that seemed to be in constant production within the store, and its crispy baked exterior made itself evident. As I bit into it, plenty of sweetness, together with the faintly salty red bean paste, filled my mouth. It tasted delicious, and the green tea paired rather well with it.

“Doesn’t it taste great? Following me was the right decision after all.”

“Just a little.”

“You aren’t honest, huh. At this rate won’t you just go back to being alone once I’m gone?”

It’s not like that would bother me. That was what I thought. To me, the situation now was the true anomaly.

Once she was gone, I would return to my original lifestyle. Without interacting with anyone, I’d shroud myself in the world of novels. I’d return to that kind of everyday. It wasn’t something that was decidedly bad. But, I didn’t think I could make her understand.

Once we were done with our meal, she spread her magazine open on the table.

"What are we going to do next?”

“Oh, you’re really getting into this huh.”

“I decided that I may as well lick the plate clean after seeing a scarecrow on the Shinkansen.”

“Ah, okay, I don’t understand what you just said. But I’ve come up with a list of things I wanted to do before I die.”

That was a good thing. She had probably realised how pointless it was to spend time with me.

“Like going on a journey with a boy, eating tonkotsu ramen at its place of conception, and though we just plunged into this journey, for now, the last goal for the me of today is to have offal hotpot for dinner. If I can fulfil that much for today, I’ll be super happy. Get-Along-kun, do you have anywhere else you want to go?”

“Not really, I’m basically indifferent to tourist attractions, so I don’t really know any places for us to go. I’ve already said it in yesterday’s message, but I’m fine with going anywhere you want to go.”

“Hmm, I see, so what shall we do……. Wah!”

She had let out a dumb sound. The cause was the sound of something breaking coupled with someone’s crude scream that had filled the room. I turned towards the direction of the ruckus and I realised that within that ever-noisy group of aunties, one of them had raised her voice hysterically. Next to them, the granny was bowing her head. It seemed that she had somehow stumbled and toppled over a teacup. The crash of the ceramic teacup shattering against the floor had surprised the girl who was troubled thinking about our next course of action.

I kept a watch on the situation and observed. Even though the granny continued to apologise profusely, the auntie who seemed to have gotten tea spilt on her own clothes got increasingly possessed by hysteria, and appeared no different from a lunatic. Glancing in front of me, I saw that she was also watching as she sipped on her tea.

I had thought that the situation would somehow be resolved peacefully, but my expectations were quickly dashed - the auntie absolutely blew her lid and roughly shoved the granny away. Having been pushed over, the granny staggered and collided with a table, causing it to flip and collapse onto the floor. The soy sauce dispenser and a bunch of disposable chopsticks were also scattered about.

The only one that still remained in the side-lines after witnessing the present state of affairs was me.

“Wait a moment!”

Raising her voice to a level that I had not heard until now, the girl that should have been sharing a table with me stood up, and rushed over to the granny down the aisle.

“I knew it,” I thought. I, who wished to remain a bystander, and she, who wanted to be involved - it was that kind of thing. I could say with conviction that if I reversed myself as a person, that if I were her, I would have stood up too.

The girl helped the granny up, yelling at the ladies she considered her enemies. Of course, her opponents fought back, but this was probably her true worth. Having seen her in action, the other customers in the shop - the father of the family, and the elderly couple - kicked into gear, and supported the girl.

After receiving criticisms from all sides, even the other aunties turned red. The group hastily left the store, muttering complaints all the way out. With the troublemakers gone, the girl checked on the granny, and was praised in return. I was still drinking my tea.

After putting back the table in its original position, the girl returned with an “I’m back”. She still appeared to be mad. I thought that she may have been upset with my lack of action, but that wasn’t it.

“Even though the granny tripped and fell over because that auntie suddenly stretched her foot out. How utterly horrible!”

“Yeah.”

In this world, there exists a notion that the sins of perpetrators and bystanders carried the same weight. In which case, I was no different from those aunties, and so refrained from strongly condemning them.

While looking at the girl who got angry for the sake of justice, and whose days were numbered, I thought that the devil’s children really had the devil’s luck.

“There are plenty of humans that should die before you, huh.”

“I know, right!”

I smiled bitterly at her agreement. Just like I had thought, I'd probably be alone again once she was gone.

When we left the store, she received six umegae-mochi from the granny as a thank-you gift and souvenir. She turned it down at first, but at the granny's insistence, graciously accepted it. I too got to eat some of that umegae-mochi which had been baked as part of an earlier batch, and I enjoyed the moist and different texture – even this too, was delicious.

"For now, let's head towards the city, since we need to look for a Uniqlo too."

"That's true, I sweated more than I thought I would. I'm really sorry but, I'll definitely repay you before you die, so could you lend me some money?"

"Huh, I don't want to."

"……You're a spawn of the devil, huh. Let's get along in hell."

"Wahaha, it was a lie, I was just joking, just joking. It's fine even if you don't repay me."

"No way, I'll repay you everything you've paid for up till now too."

"How stubborn."

We took the train, and headed back to the station we came from. The inside of the train was quiet. The elderly were dozing off, and the little children were gathered together, holding their war council in whispers. Since the girl was reading her magazine beside me, I gazed blankly outside. The time indicated that evening was approaching, but the summer sky was still bright. It would be great if it just stayed bright forever. Having reached this moment in time, I started thinking about that kind of thing on a whim.

"If only I had made that my wish to the god instead," I muttered to myself, as she folded her magazine and closed her eyes. She stayed like that, fast asleep until we arrived at our station.

The number of people at the station had increased from the afternoon. In the midst of students and salarymen making their daily commute, we walked leisurely. I thought that the residents of this prefecture walked faster than those living elsewhere. Maybe it was to avoid trouble in an unsafe prefecture.

After consulting with her, we decided to proceed to the single downtown district within the prefecture. We had looked it up on our cellphones, and it seemed that there was also a Uniqlo over there. We searched it up some more, and apparently, in order to get to the first station within the city from the location of the shrine, we should have continued on without exiting the ticket gates. But at any rate, having been abducted, it was impossible for me to have done my research, and she was never a human meticulous enough to care about such things.

We got on the subway, and headed downtown.

The night had fallen completely, and it was now 8 PM. We were seated at a hori-gotatsu, picking at a steaming hotpot. The taste of the specialty hotpot with no other ingredients but offal, cabbage, and garlic chives had left me - who had declared meat superior to innards - speechless. Of course, the girl was as noisy as ever.

“It’s great to be alive!”

“No lies in that statement huh.”

I drank the soup from my own bowl. Thoroughly delicious.

After we had arrived at the city, we visited Uniqlo, and following which, we simply wandered around aimlessly. We entered a glasses shop because she wanted to buy sunglasses, and later visited a bookshop I had spotted. It was fairly enjoyable just looking at the townscape of a land I didn’t know. Later still, we chased pigeons in a park we chanced upon, and sampled the signature confections of the prefecture in a local confectionery. Time passed right by.

As the darkness of night crept in, the prefecture’s residents began lining up at the unusual food stalls along the street. While I was still fixated on the scene before me, we started making our way towards a hotpot establishment that had caught her eye. Since it was a weekday - or perhaps we were just lucky - we were ushered to a table in the crowded restaurant straight away. “It’s all thanks to me,” so she bragged, but she hadn’t even made a reservation or anything like that, so it absolutely wasn’t thanks to her.

For the most part, we didn’t talk about anything of substance during our meal. She heaped praises onto the hotpot from start to finish as I quietly relished the food. I managed to enjoy the hotpot without saying anything pointless. When faced with delicious food, it wouldn’t do to act otherwise.

The next time she opened that pointless mouth of hers was when the store attendant added Chinese noodles to the soup brimming with umami.

“With this, the two of us are hotpot buddies too.”

“Are you trying to make it seem like we’ve been living under the same roof and eating from the same pot?”

“Even more than that. Since I’ve never even eaten hotpot with any of my boyfriends.”

She tittered. The reason her way of laughing was different from usual was because alcohol had entered her system. She had brazenly ordered wine despite her status as a high school girl. The waiter made no second guesses as to the excessively unabashed order, and promptly conferred a glass of white wine. Even though I would’ve been happier had he just contacted the police.

The girl who was in an even better mood than normal wanted to talk about herself even more than usual. It was convenient for me since I preferred to listen to what other humans had to say, as compared to speaking myself.

As for how our conversation went, she started with her last boyfriend who was apparently also my classmate.

“He’s a super great guy. Yeah, really, I received a confession from him, and I thought that since he was a good person and a friend, it’d be fine to go out with him, so it was hard to understand that it wasn’t like that. I mean, I’ve already said it quite frankly, haven’t I? After we started going out, he’d get moody easily, and once we started fighting, he’d stay angry for a super long time. It’d have been fine if we were friends, but I didn’t want to be with him any longer.”

She brought the wine to her mouth. I kept quiet, unable to empathise, and listened to what she had to say.

“Even Kyouko had good things to say about my ex-boyfriend. Since he seemed like a refreshing boy on the surface.”

“Doesn’t seem to have anything to do with me.”

“That’s true, after all, Kyouko does avoid you.”

“Didn’t you think you’d hurt me by saying something like that?”

“Are you hurt?”

“I’m not hurt. I avoid her too, so we’re even.”

“Even though I want you to get along with Kyouko after I die huh.”

With an expression different from how it was up till now, she looked at me straight in the eye. Evidently, it seemed like she was serious about those words. With no way out, I answered, “I’ll think about it.” “Please do,” came her curt reply. Those words were spoken with an earnest conviction. My heart that had already decided that we weren’t going to get along anyway wavered, if just a little.

We left the restaurant once we had satisfied ourselves with the hotpot, and our faces were caressed by the pleasant night wind. Even though there were coolers installed within the restaurant, they were made largely defunct by the many hotpots simmering away inside. She had left after me, since she had been footing the bill. Under the condition that I would definitely repay her for everything she spent on me on this trip, I agreed to leave the bills to her.

“Waaah! Feels great!”

“It’s still cooling at night huh.”

“Right? Okay then, guess it’s about time we head to the hotel.”

I had heard about our place of residence from her earlier in the afternoon. It was a fairly high-grade hotel that was connected to the Shinkansen station we had arrived at, and it seemed to be well-known even within the prefecture. She had actually intended on staying at a simple business hotel, but when she informed her parents about her plans, they proposed that she may as well stay at a better place, and so provided her with a subsidy. Since she had already gone that far, there was no reason not to take advantage of their kindness - it was that kind of thing. Of course, half the money her parents had forked out was meant for Best-Friend-san, but the responsibility for that lay with her, so it wasn’t my business.

Having reached the station, it really wasn’t long till we arrived at the hotel. No, it’s not like I was casting doubt on the official information, what I had meant was that the hotel was even closer than I’d expected.

I had already confirmed it beforehand in the magazine she had brought along, so I wasn’t overwhelmed by the luxury and elegance of the hotel’s interior. If I hadn’t prepared my heart, my jaw would’ve probably hit the

ground. And so, I should have been bowing my head down to her. But since even I had a grain of self-respect that wouldn't allow that, I was really glad to just act surprised on the surface.

Even though I'd avoided getting blown away, I was still becoming predictably restless in this atmosphere that didn't match my own social standing. I thus let her handle the checking in, while I sat down on the refined lobby's sofa, and quietly waited for her. The comfort I got from sitting on the sofa felt deep and gentle.

With a look that indicated she was used to this, she boldly headed for the counter, and the hotel staff all bowed their heads down as she approached. I thought without a doubt that she wouldn't become a decent adult, but then remembered that she simply wouldn't become an adult.

While drinking tea from a clearly out-of-place PET bottle, I watched from the side as she dealt with the receptionist.

The person handling her check-in was slender, and had his hair combed straight back - a young man that very much gave off the air of a hotel receptionist.

Just as I thought about the trouble the receptionist would have to go through, she started to fill in some form she was presented with. I didn't listen to the contents of their conversation from this point onwards, but she returned the piece of paper, and with a refined demeanour, the beaming receptionist began keying in the information into his computer. Probably having confirmed the reservation, he turned back to her and began courteously speaking.

She made a surprised expression, and shook her head. The receptionist's face stiffened in response, as he began to operate the computer once again, all the while still speaking to her. She shook her head again, took her backpack off her shoulders, and handed over a piece of paper that she had retrieved from within.

The receptionist compared the piece of paper to the computer screen, and frowned before momentarily withdrawing further behind the counter. Like her, I waited around doing nothing in particular, until he returned with an older man; the two of them bowed their heads to her profusely and countlessly.

After which, it wasn't the younger man, but his senior that made a deep, full-bodied bow of apology, and began speaking to her. She made a troubled smile.

I watched the situation unfold from the side, wondering if something had happened. Thinking about it normally, it would have been logical to be under the impression that there had been a mistake on the hotel's side, and the reservation had been recorded erroneously, but I felt that that alone would not have explained her troubled smile. Whatever the case, I expected the hotel to properly deal with the situation, and so thought little of it. At worst, we could simply wait out the night at some net cafe.

Still smiling in a troubled manner, she kept stealing glances at me, and so for no particular reason at all, I nodded back at her. There wasn't really any meaning behind that action, but after spotting my response, she said something to the two apologetic men at the counter.

Right away, the faces of the two receptionists brightened up, and though they kept their heads down as always, it seemed like this time, they offered her words of gratitude. The me a few minutes later was going to want to beat up the me that thought it was best their conversation had concluded. Just like I've said many times before, I was lacking in my crisis-management skills.

After accepting the key and the like, she returned with her head held low once again. I looked up at her face, and told her, "Seems like you had some trouble huh." She returned my efforts with her facial expressions. First, she pursed her lips, showing her embarrassment and apprehension, then she peeked at my expression, and finally - as if she was casting them all away - she broke into a broad grin.

"Hey, so it seems like they made a little blunder."

"Yeah."

"They've filled up all the rooms of the type we originally made reservations for."

"I see."

"Yup, so, since it's their responsibility, it seems like they'll prepare a much better room for us than the one we had reserved."

"That's pretty great huh."

"Hey……."

She dangled the single key she carried in her hand beside her face.

“We’ll have to share the room, but it’s fine right?”

“…….Huh?”

There’s wasn’t a single sensible thing I could say in response to her smile.

I was getting sick of explaining things like this, and I think if anyone could read the inside of my heart, this situation’s development would be fairly obvious, but I was overpowered by her, and ended up staying over in the same room.

I’d like if no one thought that I was a weak-willed flirt that easily agreed to stay in the same room as someone of the opposite gender. To put it in one way, there were some financial issues between me and her. Just by exploiting that alone, my insistence that it would be better for me to stay over at a separate location was denied.

That said, who was I even making excuses for?

Yes, excuses. Taking on a firm stance and going in a separate direction from her - that was what I should have done. Even for her, it would probably have been impossible to stop me. However, I willingly didn’t do so. The reason? Well, I’m not sure.

In any case, I ended up sharing the same room with her. Having said that, there wasn’t anything for me to feel guilty about. I could guarantee that for the rest of my life. We were pure.

“Isn’t sleeping together in the same bed exciting?”

Okay, I was the only one who was pure.

“Are you dumb?”

I frowned at the girl who had said something strange after spinning around as though she were dancing under the chandelier that emanated a soft light from the middle of the spacious room. I sat down on a good sofa within the Western-style space, and told her something of the utmost common sense.

“I’ll be over here.”

“Come on, since we’ve gotten a good room, you should at least have a proper taste of the bed!”

“In that case, I’ll lie down on the bed for a little while afterwards.”

“Shouldn’t you be happy to sleep with a girl?”

“Stop with those unwarranted attempts at character assassination. Look, I’m just a gentleman wherever I go. Just save those kinds of things for a boyfriend.”

“Since we’re not in a relationship, wouldn’t it be fun to do things we shouldn’t do?”

After saying that, seemingly having thought of something, she took out the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ from her backpack and made a memo. I often saw this behaviour when observing her.

“Wo~w! There’s a jacuzzi!”

While listening to her frolicking about in the bathroom, I opened the glass door, and stepped out onto the veranda. The room we had been shown to was located on the 15th floor of the high-rise, and even though it wasn’t a suite, it was way too luxurious for high school students. The toilet and the bath were even separated, and the night view was spectacular.

“Waaah, it’s wonderful.”

Before I knew it, she was out on the veranda, enjoying the night view. Her long hair swayed in the whispering wind.

“It’s just the two of us gazing into the night - don’t you think it’s romantic?”

I returned into the room without answering. Sitting on the sofa, I picked up the remote on the round table before me, switched on the television that was as big as the room was large, and browsed through the channels. There were many local programmes on air that I usually didn’t get to see, and the entertainers showcasing dialects caught my interest more than the girl’s nonsense.

Abandoning the veranda, she closed the glass door and cut in front of me to sit on the bed. I could imagine from the look on her face when she made a “woah” just how springy the bed was. Alright then, guess it wouldn’t hurt to have just a little taste of its springs.

Just like me, she was watching the large television.

“Dialects are interesting huh. Have ye eaten? It sounds just like some warrior from way back. Even though the town is cutting-edge, its dialect sounds old - how strange.”

For someone like her, she said something rather meaningful.

“Seems like it’d be pretty fun to study dialects as a job.”

“Guess we agree once in a while huh. Even I’m thinking that it’d be fine if I studied that kind of stuff once I enter university.”

“How nice, I wanted to go to university too.”

“……What do you want me to say to that?”

I’d like if she stopped with the non-humorous, sentimentality-cladded stuff. I didn’t even know how I was supposed to feel.

“Don’t you have any trivia about dialects or something?”

“Let’s see, well, when we hear them, they all sound like the same Kansai dialect to us, but there are actually quite a number of variants. How many variants do you think there are?”

“Ten thousand!”

“……That’s just plain impossible. I’m going to get angry if you keep pulling answers out of thin air, you know? There are various views, but some say the actual number may even be close to thirty.”

“Huh, is that so.”

“……I wonder just how many people you’ve hurt up till now.”

Since she was a girl with a wide network of acquaintances, that number was probably immeasurable. Honestly, what a sinful human. On that point, I, who didn’t acquaint myself with anybody, would never hurt anyone. As for which of us is righteous as a person, I think that judgement will be divided.

She silently watched the television for a while, but before long - probably finding it unbearable to remain still - she began rolling around on the wide bed, and after completely messing it up, she loudly exclaimed, “I’m having a bath!” Following which, she entered the bathroom and started filling the tub with hot water. With the sound of gushing water acting as BGM from beyond the bathroom wall, she retrieved various small items from her

backpack, and started the water in the washroom that was separate from the bathroom. She was probably removing her make up. Though it's not like I was interested.

Once the bath was filled with hot water, she disappeared into the bath with delightful glee. "Peeping is a no-no." Such was the foolish piece of advice I had received, but I didn't even look at her walking into the bathroom. See, it's because I was a gentleman.

I could hear her humming a song in the bathroom, something I'd heard before from what was probably a commercial. Wondering just how in the world had I arrived at the present situation in which I was sitting so close to a classmate as she took a hot bath, I thought back and reflected on my own plans and actions. Looking up at the ceiling, the chandelier flickered from the corner of my eye.

When I had reached the part of my memory where I was getting assaulted by her on the Shinkansen, I was called out to.

"Get-along-ku~n, could you get me the facial cleansing cream from my backpack?"

Submitting to her voice that echoed from the bathroom, without feeling anything in particular, I grabbed the sky blue backpack that had been left on the bed and peeked inside.

I hadn't felt anything.

That was why it was as if my heart had been hit with an earthquake from somewhere when I laid my eyes on its contents.

I looked inside the backpack - coloured just as brightly as her.

And though there should have been no need or reason to be shaken up, my heart was pounding.

Even though I should have known, even though I should have understood. Even though I should have already grasped the premise of her existence, having seen that, I choked.

Calm down……

I told myself so.

Inside her backpack were several syringes, an unprecedented amount of pills, and what seemed to be a measuring apparatus that I didn't know how to operate.

I somehow managed to hold my ground and stop my thoughts from racing away.

I had known, that this was reality. The truth that she was maintaining her existence with the power of medical science. When I looked at what lay before my eyes, I felt an unspeakable horror befall me. And right at that moment, the face of the fear that entrapped me showed itself.

"Anything wro~ng?"

I turned towards the bathroom, and saw her wet arm flapping about; she, who lacked even the slightest clue about the state of my heart. In order to prevent her from realising the feelings that had been born within me, I hurriedly searched for the tube of facial cleansing cream and handed it over to her.

"Thaaanks! Ah, this is because I'm naked right now!"

Before I could even muster a response, she cracked, "At least say something! This is embarrassing!" Having fulfilled the role of a straight man in her own little routine, she closed the bathroom door.

I approached the bed she had occupied and threw my body onto it. It engulfed me in a springiness that I had come to expect. And the white ceiling seemed to engulf even my consciousness.

I was confused.

But why?

I should have been aware, I should have known, and I should have understood.

But even so, I was still averting my eyes.

Averting my eyes from her reality.

In actuality, just by having seen those items, I was becoming ruled by mistaken feelings. It was as though a monster was gnawing at my heart.

Why?

My unsettled thoughts went spinning round and round, and I fell asleep on the bed, the spinning probably having reached my eyes.

When I had come to, the girl who had washed her hair was shaking my shoulder. The monster had retreated for now.

“So you did want to sleep on the bed.”

“……Like I said, I just wanted to have one taste. This is plenty.”

I stood up and seated myself on the sofa. So as to ensure she wouldn’t notice the wounds the monster left, I stared at the television as expressionlessly as I could. I’d regained my composure, and the fact that I could do that much was reassuring.

The girl was drying her long hair with the dryer provided.

“Get-Along-kun, you should take a bath too, the jacuzzi was great!”

“Guess I should. No peeping alright, since I’m going to peel off my human skin when I enter the bath.”

“You got sunburnt?”

“Yeah, guess that works too.”

With the Uniqlo carrier that contained the clothes I’d bought with money borrowed from her, I headed into the bathroom. Where humidity was heaviest, a sweet scent swirled about, but knowing better, I simply dismissed it as a concoction of my imagination.

Just in case, I properly locked the door before I removed my clothes and rinsed myself under the shower. After I was done washing my head and body, I immersed myself in the bathtub. Just like she said, once I activated the jacuzzi function, I was enveloped by a sense of bliss that couldn’t be put into words. The tracks left by the monster trampling over my heart were slowly washed away. Baths were great. I fully enjoyed the bath of a high-class hotel that I supposed I wouldn’t get a taste of for at least another ten years.

I left the bath and found the chandelier lights switched off, making the room considerably dimmer. The girl was seated on the sofa that should have been my bed, and lying on the round table was a convenience store carrier that hadn’t been there before.

“I bought some snacks and stuff from the convenience store downstairs! Could you get two cups from the shelf over there?”

Just as she had requested, I grabbed hold of the two cups and brought them over to the table. Since the sofa was occupied, I sat on the elegantly designed chair across the table. Just like the sofa, this too had a springiness that could calm a person’s heart.

While I sat comfortably, she lowered the convenience store carrier onto the floor, retrieved from it a bottle, and poured its contents into the two cups. She filled them both to half their capacity with the amber-coloured liquid, and then continued filling them with a colourless carbonated drink from another bottle until they were about to overflow. The two liquids mixed together, creating a mysterious cocktail.

“And this is?”

“Plum liqueur mixed with soda - I wonder if this ratio is alright.”

“I’ve been thinking since the offal hotpot, but you’re only a high school student.”

“I’m not acting cool or anything, I just like alcoholic drinks. You’re not going to drink?”

“…… It can’t be helped, I’ll join you.”

I brought the completely filled cup to my mouth, making sure not to spill any of the plum liqueur. The first sip of alcohol I had drunk in some time had a refreshing aroma, and was unexpectedly sweet.

She enjoyed sipping at her own share of plum liqueur - just like she had proclaimed - while spreading her snacks out on the table one by one.

“Which faction of potato chip flavours are you in? I’m in consommé.”

“Anything other than salt is just anti-establishment.”

“We really do go in different directions huh! I didn’t buy anything but consommé though - serves you right.”

I watched the girl that seemed to be having quite some fun, and sure enough, the liqueur was becoming too sweet. I was pretty much stuffed after the offal hotpot, but the junk food oddly got my appetite working

again. While munching on the treacherous consommé potato chips, I sipped on the liqueur.

Once we were both done with our first glass, she poured us a second glass each, and made a proposal.

“Let’s play a game.”

“A game? We’re even going to play shogi?”

“I’m at the level where I can at least understand the rules of shogi, but you look like a strong player to me.”

“Well I do like tsume-shogi, since I can play it alone.”

“How lonesome. I brought poker cards though.”

She walked over to the bed, and brought back a box containing a set of poker cards from inside her backpack.

“I think it’s more lonesome to play with poker cards with just the two of us. For example, what do you even want us to play?”

“Grand Millionaire?”

“It’ll just be revolution after revolution and there won’t be any commoners though.”

She giggled, seemingly in a good mood.

“Hmmm.”

Taking out the poker cards from the plastic box, she looked like she was thinking as her body shook from the shuffling. Without being particularly intrusive, I took the Pocky she had bought and nibbled on one.

Once she shuffled the cards about five times, she stopped. After seemingly nodding to herself in approval countless times for coming up with some idea, her sparkling eyes turned to me.

“Since we’re already drinking, let’s go with the momentum and play Truth or Dare too.”

I knitted my eyebrows, having heard the name of a game I wasn’t used to hearing.

“What kind of game has a name as heavy as that?”

“You don’t know? Then I’ll explain the rules as we play. But first, the most important rule. You absolutely can’t quit the game. Got it?

"In other words, I just can’t push over the shogi board, right? That’s fine, I won’t do that sort of unrefined thing.”

“You really said it huh?”

Her mischievous laughter had an odious tinge. She moved all the snacks on the table to the floor, and skilfully spread the faced down poker cards onto the tabletop to form a circle. I could tell from her expression that she was going to exploit the gap in our experience to beat me, and this in turn fired me up - I was determined to take her down a peg or two. There was no problem, since most games involving poker cards were battles of wit and luck. Experience wouldn’t help much once I understood the rules.

“Incidentally, we’re using poker cards because we just happened to have them, but using rock-papers-scissors would be fine too.”

“……Give me back my fire.”

“I’ve already eaten it. Alright, so the one that flips over the largest card from within this circle will be the winner. And the winner will get the right.”

“The right?”

“The right to ask ‘truth or dare?’ Speaking of which, I guess ten rounds will do. For now, just pick a card.”

As instructed, I flipped a card over. It was the 8 of Spades.

“What if we both pick cards of the same number?”

“It’d be troublesome otherwise, so we’ll just pick another card. I mentioned it earlier too, but since I only made up the rule because it was fitting, this game isn’t really related to poker itself.”

This time she drank her plum liqueur as she turned over a card. It was the 11 of Hearts. I didn’t really understand, but I could tell I was definitely in a disadvantageous situation, so I readied myself.

“Ya~y, so now I have the right. Now I’m going to ask ‘truth or dare?’ And first, you’re going to say ‘truth’. Okay, so, truth or dare?”

“Truth…… Then what?”

“Then for starters, who do you think is the cutest in our class?”

“……Just what are you asking all of a sudden?”

“This is Truth or Dare, you know? If you can’t answer, then you’ll have to choose dare. And if you choose to have a dare, then I’ll decide what you have to do as the dare. Whether it’s truth or dare, you absolutely can’t avoid choosing one of them.”

“What a devil’s game.”

“I’ve already said it before, but you can’t back out now. Didn’t you agree to it too? You wouldn’t do anything unrefined, right?”

Thinking that making me show my resentment was all part of her plan, I remained expressionless in front of her, who was laughing unpleasantly as she drank her liqueur.

No, it was too early to give up. There should still be a way out somewhere.

“Does such a game really exist? Are you sure you didn’t just make it up on the spot? If that’s the case, then I insist that it invalidates my agreement to not drop out of the game.”

“Too bad, huh. Do you really think I’m the sort of human that doesn’t think their plans through?”

“I do.”

“Muahaha, it’s a fully-fledged game that has even appeared in many movies. I can assure you it’s real since I’ve properly looked it up after seeing it in a movie once. So thanks for going out of your way to reiterate that you wouldn’t quit the game.”

Cackling in a manner that I imagined only the denizens of hell could, there was clearly malice lurking within her eyes.

Somehow, it seemed that I’d once again been caught in a trap. Just how many times did this make it?

“Let’s not violate public order and morals in our truths and dares though - ah, but you’ve never experienced anything erotic before huh, good grief, you’ve got to remember to control yourself alright.”

“Keep quiet, dummy.”

“How mean!”

She finished the liqueur in her cup, and poured herself a third one. Her perpetual half-smile indicated that some of the alcohol had probably already begun circulating in her system. Incidentally, my face had been hot since a while ago.

“So, first of all, my question - who do you think is the cutest in our class?”

“I don’t judge people by their appearances you know.”

“Personality doesn’t really matter, it’s about who you think has the cutest face.”

“……”

“Incidentally, I’m not going to show any mercy if you chose to do a dare instead.”

I felt nothing but bad vibes from that.

I thought of the best way to avoid damage in this situation. It couldn’t be helped - I chose truth.

“I think that girl is pretty. That girl who’s good at math.”

“Ah!! You mean Hina! She’s one eighth German you know. Hmm, so you like that kind of girl. Even though Hina’s pretty, I don’t think she has a boyfriend or anything, and if I were a boy I’d probably choose Hina too. You’ve got a good eye, huh!”

“Saying I have a good eye only if it matches your opinion, you really have an enormous ego huh.”

I drank more liqueur. I had become a lot more numb to the taste than before.

At her command, I once again chose another card. Nine rounds to go. It looked unlikely that I’d be able to escape halfway, so I hoped for all of the

remaining questions to be mine to ask. Alas, it seemed that I wasn't really lucky in times such as this.

I got the 2 of Hearts, and she got the 6 of Diamonds.

"Woohoo, I guess heaven favours children with kind hearts."

"I've suddenly become unable to believe in any god."

"Truth or dare?"

"……Truth."

"If Hina is number one in the class, just by appearance, where do I place?"

"……Amongst the faces of the humans I can force myself to remember - number three."

Thinking of infusing myself with the alcohol's power, I drank more of my liqueur. At the same time, she too brought her cup to her mouth, and drank even more vigorously than me.

"Wo~w, I did ask the question myself, but I'm super embarrassed! I mean who'd have expected Get-Along-kun to answer so honestly - it's too much."

"I just want this to end faster. So I've resigned myself."

Probably because of the liqueur, her face had turned red.

"Get-Along-kun, just take it slow, the night is long after all."

"That's true. They do say time feels longer if you're not enjoying yourself."

"I'm having a lot of fun though."

So she said, pouring another two cups of plum liqueur. Since there wasn't any soda left, she filled the cups to the brim with the strong plum liqueur. Even without a taste, I could tell just how sweet it was from the fragrance it emanated.

"I see, so I'm the third cutest huh. Ehehehehe."

"Never mind that, I'm drawing my card. Alright, the 12 of Diamonds."

“Do you really not intend on getting fired up for this game? Here I come - waaah, the 2 of Hearts.”

I took a glance at her disappointed-looking face, and I was relieved from the bottom of my heart. The greatest resistance I could muster within the ten rounds of this game was to trump her hand, even just once more. I swore that once these ten rounds were over, I’d never again join her in these incomprehensible activities that she called games.

“Come on, Get-Along-kun, say it.”

“Aaah, truth or dare?”

“Truth!”

“Ermmm, that’s right, hmm.”

I wondered about what I wanted to know about her, and thought of it right away.

Something that I wanted to know about her – there was nothing else but this.

“Okay, I’ve decided.”

“This is starting to get my heart pounding!”

“What kind of child were you?

“……Erm, is that really okay? I was even prepared to at least reveal my three sizes.”

"Be quiet, dummy.”

“How horrible!”

She leant back and looked upwards, seemingly enjoying herself. Of course, the intention behind my question wasn’t to hear about her fond memories. What I wanted to know was how a human like her came to be. I wanted to know how she - my opposite - grew up, how the surrounding humans impacted her, and how she impacted them.

The reason was simply because I found it mysterious. I wondered just how large the gap between our lives must have been for the establishment of our

differing natures. I was interested in whether I could have turned out to be like her with a single misstep.

“How I was as a child huuuh - at any rate, I’ve been told that I was restless.”

“Makes sense huh, I can easily imagine.”

“Right? Since girls were taller in elementary school, I would even get into fights with the largest boy in class. I even wrecked some things, so I was a problematic child.”

Indeed, there may be a link between the size of a person’s body and their character. My body had always been small and weak. Perhaps that was why I became an introverted human.

“Is this much enough?”

“I guess so, then let’s move on.”

Thereafter, it seemed that the gods really did favour good children, and somehow or other I won five straight victories. The proud girl from when the game began had disappeared, leaving the girl that the gods had abandoned together with her pancreas, who drank more liqueur with each loss and had gotten into a bad mood. No, to be accurate, she got displeased every time she heard my questions. With only two sets remaining, her face was bright red and her lips were pursed, and it looked like she was going to slide down the sofa. It was as if she were a child sulking.

Incidentally, below are the five rounds of questions and answers that made her say, “Is this an interview?”

“What’s the interest you’ve had for the longest time?”

“If I had to pick something, I gue~ss I’ve always loved movies.”

“Which famous person do you respect the most and why?”

“Chiune Sugihara! The one that gave the Jews visas. It think it was super cool of him to go through with what he himself thought was right.”

“What do you think are your own strengths and weaknesses?”

“My strength is that I can get along with everyone, and I’m not totally sure about my weakness, but I guess it’s how I’m easily distracted.”

"What’s the happiest moment of your life?”

“Hehe, I guess it’s meeting you. Teehee.”

“Not counting the stuff about your pancreas, what’s the most painful moment of your life?”

“I guess it was when the dog I was always with died when I was in middle school……. Hey, is this an interview?”

I made a splendid face of ignorance if I said so myself, and responded, “Nope, it’s a game.” And with teary eyes, she cried out, “Then ask questions that are more fun!” After which, she proceeded to drink another cup of liqueur.

“Drink up.”

So as to not offend the drunkard that was facing me with a vulgar look, I drank some liqueur too. With that, I had become rather tipsy as well, but I was still better at maintaining a poker face than her.

“Two rounds remaining; I’m going to draw now - the 11 of Spades.”

“Whaaat! Why’s it so stro~ng, gah!

While wholeheartedly moaning in sorrow, frustration and exasperation, she flipped open a card too. I looked at the number she had drawn, and I - who had been convinced that I’d won - had sweat dripping down my back.

The 13 of Spades - it was a king.

"I, I, I, I did it! ……Hmm?”

It seemed that the alcohol had reached the legs of the girl that cheered and stood up at the same time, and so she staggered and toppled back onto the sofa. With an appearance completely different from before, she snickered at the abnormal state of her own body.

“Hey, Get-Along-kun, I apologise, but this time, could you choose after I’ve revealed both the question and the order?”

“So you’ve finally revealed your true colours huh, to say nothing of the questions, you really just want to give orders.”

“Aaah, yeah, yeah, it’s Truth or Dare after all.”

“Well I guess it doesn’t break the rules.”

“A~lright, truth or dare? For truth, tell me three things that you think are cute about me. For dare, carry me to the bed.”

My body started to move on its own, perhaps even before she stopped talking. In this case, if I chose truth, I’d eventually have to move her anyway, so there wasn’t any room for hesitation in choosing the option that let me kill two birds with one stone. Not to mention, the question she asked for truth was much too foul.

Standing up, I was struck by the false impression that my body was lighter than usual. I headed towards the sofa she was sitting on. She cackled, seemingly enjoying herself. It seemed that the alcohol had gone to her head. Thinking of lending her a hand, I stretched my palm out right before her eyes. As I did so, her loud laughter stopped.

“What’s with the hand?”

“I’m lending you a hand, so come on, stand up.”

“Nope, not gonna stand. Since I can’t put any strength into my legs.”

She slowly raised the corners of her lips.

“Haven’t I said it? To CA~RR~Y ME.”

“……”

“Come on, come on, a piggyback might be good, or maybe even a princ-waaah!”

Before she could finish saying that embarrassing name, I dug my arms beneath her back and knees, and lifted her up. Even the feeble me had enough strength to carry her for a few meters. Hesitating was a no-go - that was what I thought. There was no problem - we were drunk right now, so some shame could be slept off.

Before she could even show any reaction, I threw the girl in my arms onto the bed. The heat slipped away from my arms. She remained frozen, shock still apparent on her face. Out of breath, no thanks to the alcohol and physical exertion, I stared at her as her face slowly and quietly broke into a

smile before she started to laugh in a manner reminiscent of the clicking noises that bats made.

“I was surprised! Tha~nks!”

As she said as such, with slow and sluggish actions, she moved to the left side of the large bed, lay on her back, and closed her eyes. I thought that it would’ve been good if she just fell asleep like that, but she giggled as she hit the surface of the bed with both her arms. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem like she would forfeit the last game.

I hardened my resolve.

“Well, it’s the last round huh. I’ll specially flip yours open for you. Just say which one it is you want.”

“Okay, guess I’ll go with the one right next to my cup.”

She went quiet, and she casually threw her restless arms onto the bed.

I, still standing, flipped open the card whose corner had been caught under the cup holding a little plum liqueur.

The 7 of Clubs.

“7.”

“Waaah, ambi.”

“Is it alright if I take that to mean that you’re ambivalent?”

“Yup, ambi.”

I ignored the girl that continued to say “ambi~” after probably having taken a fancy to the word, and stared at the circle of cards to choose my last one. In times like this, there may be people that would deliberate over and take great care in their choice, but they were mistaken. Since we were pretty much choosing under the same conditions, there were basically no other factors involved apart from luck. In such cases, one should quickly make their decision without looking back.

Casually, I picked a card from within the circle, and to the best of my ability, I cleared my mind of unnecessary thoughts before flipping it open.

What I needed was luck.

No matter if I decided that this counted as being manly or not, the number wouldn’t change.

The card that I drew was-

“What number is it?”

“……6.”

In times like this, I - who was honest to the extent that I couldn’t lie - was at a disadvantage. It would probably be easier for me if I was able to become a human that could push over the shogi board, but I didn’t want to become one, and I couldn’t.

“Woohoo, wonder what I should get you to do~.”

After saying so, she became silent. Feeling like a prisoner on death row, I stood still as I awaited her question.

For the first time in a while, silence befell the dim interior. Perhaps as part of the hotel fee, almost no noises from outside could be heard - not even the noise from the neighbouring rooms leaked through. Unpleasantly, due to the fact that I was drunk, I could clearly hear the sounds of my own breathing and heartbeat. I could also hear her regular and deep breaths. I thought that she may have even fallen asleep, but when I looked at her, her eyes were wide open, stare fixated on the dark ceiling.

Having too much time on my hands, I looked outside through the opening between the curtains. The busy streets still shone with man-made lights, exposing no eagerness for sleep.

“Truth or dare?”

The sudden words came from behind me - it seemed like she had finally arrived at a conclusion, and while praying my hardest that it wouldn’t be something that would threaten my heart, I answered with my back still facing her.

“Truth.”

A single breath - I heard the large flow of air, and she uttered the last question of the night.

“If I-”

“……”

“If I said I was really, really afraid of dying, what would you do?”

Without voicing a single world, I turned around.

Her voice was too soft, and it made me think that my heart was about to stop frozen. In order to escape the chills, I had to make sure if she was still alive, and so I turned around.

She might have felt my gaze on her, but even so, the girl continued to stare motionlessly at the ceiling with her lips sealed, disinterested in saying any more.

Perhaps, she was being serious. I couldn’t grasp her true intentions. It wouldn’t be strange even if she was being serious. It wouldn’t be strange even if she was joking. If I took it seriously, I wouldn’t know how to answer. If I took it as a joke, I wouldn’t know how to answer.

I didn’t know.

As if laughing at how feeble my imagination was, once again, the monster in the depths of my heart began to breathe.

The terrified me disregarded my own intentions, and opened his mouth.

“Dare……”

She didn’t say whether my choice was good or bad. She simply remained staring at the ceiling, and gave the following order:

“Sleep on the bed too, no objections or opposition allowed.”

“Ambi~,” she went once again, this time singing it with a melody.

I was frustrated over the course of action I had to take, but as expected, I was unable to push over the shogi board.

I switched off the electricity, and lay down with my back to her, simply waiting for the sandman to whisk me away to sleep. From time to time, the bed that wasn’t mine alone would rock as she tossed and turned in her sleep. It seemed she didn’t have the heart for sharing.

The large-sized bed had enough space even if the two of us were to sleep with our backs flat.

We were innocent.

Innocent, and pure.

I didn’t have to seek forgiveness from anyone.

Both she and I woke up at the same time because of the same reason. A cellphone was beeping noisily. I took out my phone from my bag, but there wasn’t even a single notification - since that meant it had to be hers, I retrieved the phone that was left on the sofa and handed it over to the girl that was sitting on the bed. The sleepy-eyed girl opened the flip phone, and held it next to her ear.

Right away, I, who wasn’t exactly next to her, could hear a roar from the phone’s speaker.

“Sakuraaaaa! Tell me where you are right now!” With a frown, she held the phone away from her ear. Once the caller had calmed down, she pressed it against her ear once again.

“Good morni~ng, what’s up?”

“Don’t ask me what’s up! I’m asking you where you are!”

Looking a little unsure, she informed the caller of the name of the prefecture we had set foot into. I could tell that the caller was appalled.

“Wha- why would you go all the way there, and you even lied to your parents that you were travelling with me!”

With that, I knew that the other person on the line was Best-Friend-san. In response to her friend that was kicking up a fuss, she let out a carefree yawn.

“How did you know?”

“There was stuff about the PTA circulating through the telephone chain this morning! After yours, it’s mine y'know! There was a call from your mom, and I was the one who picked it up - I had such a hard time fooling her.”

“So you fooled her for me, as expected of Kyouko. Thanks so much. How did you do it?”

“I pretended to be my sister, but none of that matters! Why did you go as far as deceiving your parents to go to that sort of place?”

“……Mmm.”

“Besides, if you really wanted to go, you didn’t have to lie or anything, just properly go on the trip. I’d even follow along.”

“Aah, that sounds good, let’s go somewhere over summer vacation. When does Kyouko get a break from club activities?”

“I’ll check the calendar and contact you later ‘kay - as if!”

The brilliant flatter-and-retort reached my ears with volume to spare. Even if someone was speaking at a normal volume over the phone, inside a quiet room, it’s possible to overhear a certain amount of content. I washed my face, and brushed my teeth as I watched her talking over the phone. The toothpaste was even mintier than the one I usually used.

“Basically quietly going somewhere far away by yourself - you aren’t some cat that’s about to die y'know.”

A joke that couldn’t be laughed at - I thought as I listened, and she gave a response that was even harder to laugh at, but was in fact the truth.

“I’m not alone though.”

With bloodshot eyes because of last night’s alcohol, and looking like she was enjoying herself, she directed her line of sight at me. I wanted to bury my face in my hands, but unfortunately, they were both busy holding a toothbrush and a cup.

“You’re, not alone? Huh, with who… Your boyfriend?”

“No way, you already know that I’ve broken up with him!”

“Then who is it?”

“Get-Along-kun.”

I could hear the speechlessness from the other side of the phone speaker. With no more concern as to how this would turn out, I continued to brush my teeth.

“Y'know, you-”

“Just listen to what I have to say, Kyouko.”

“……”

“You may think it’s strange, and you may not understand why, but I’ll definitely explain all of it to you someday. That’s why even if you aren’t quite convinced, please just let this go. And so, I hope you’ll keep this matter to yourself for now.”

“……”

It seemed like her tone had become serious, and before I knew it, she had put Best-Friend-san at a loss for words. I thought that that was only natural. After all, the girl did leave her best friend behind to go on a trip with some unfamiliar classmate.

Best-Friend-san kept mum for a while on the other side of the phone. The girl patiently pressed the phone against her ear. Finally, a voice could be heard from the electronic device.

“……Got it.”

“Thanks, Kyouko.”

“I have a few conditions.”

“Anything you wish.”

“Come back safely, and buy me a souvenir. Also, go on a trip with me during summer vacation. Lastly, tell this to Classmate-That-Has-An-Incomprehensible-Relationship-With-My-Best-Friend - if he does anything to Sakura, I’ll kill him.”

“Wahaha, I got it.”

After exchanging a few pleasantries, the girl hung up. I rinsed my mouth and sat on the sofa that had been stolen by her yesterday. While clearing up the poker cards that were scattered all over the table, I took a look at her and saw that she was stroking her long hair that was still messy from waking up.

“It’s nice to have a best friend that thinks of their friends, huh.”

“I know ri~ght, ah, you might have heard already, but it seems like Kyouko’s going to kill you.”

“Only if I do anything strange, right? So besides saying I was innocent, please explain things properly.”

“What about the princess carry?”

“Ooh, so it had that kind of name - with everything done and over with, I felt like I was part of some moving company.”

“Guess you’re getting killed by Kyouko no matter what she hears.”

Once she was done showering to fix her bed hair, we headed down to the first floor of the hotel to get breakfast.

Breakfast was provided in the form of a grand buffet, and as expected, it really brought to mind the class of the hotel. I mainly chose to put food like fish and tofu on my plate, and made a Japanese-style set meal breakfast. Having taken a seat by the window, I was waiting for her when she arrived with a ridiculous amount of food on her tray. “I need to eat lots in the morning,” so she said, but in the end, she left a third of the food untouched, and I had to eat that. While we were eating, I earnestly preached to her about the joys of planning.

After returning to our room, I boiled some water and brewed some coffee; she fixed herself some black tea. We took a breather and watched the morning programmes, taking up the same positions as last night. Within the serene space that dazzling sunrays streamed into, it was as if the both of us had forgotten the last question from yesterday.

“What’s the plan for today?”

When I asked, she energetically stood up, walked over to her sky blue bag, and took out a notebook. It seemed she had sandwiched the Shinkansen tickets inside it.

“We’re taking the Shinkansen at two-thirty, so we’ll have time to eat lunch and buy souvenirs. Shall we go somewhere before that?”

“I don’t know this area so I’ll just leave it to you.”

After we leisurely checked ourselves out and bowed our heads to the employees, in compliance with her decision, we took a bus and headed for a shopping mall that was apparently famous. A commercial complex that was

built to have a river run through it, it had everything from shops selling daily necessities to a theatre, and it seemed there were many foreign tourists that were visiting it as a sightseeing spot. Taking a look for myself when we arrived, the gigantic red facility had unrivalled impact, exuding the atmosphere of a true landmark.

We were lost as to where to go in the building that was made to be complicatedly magnificent, but when we wandered around, there just so happened to be a clown having a street performance at the wide space next to the water's edge, and we mixed in with the other spectators.

The approximately twenty minute long performance was entertaining, and at the humorous beckoning of the clown after the show, I put a hundred yen into his hat, as typical of a high schooler. Seemingly having enjoyed herself, she put in five hundred yen.

"Wasn't that fun? Get-Along-kun should go become a street performer too."

"Please check who it is you're talking to. Doing a job where I have to engage others is impossible for me. That's why I think that person is amazing."

"I see, that's too bad. Maybe I should give it a go. Ah, I forgot, I'm going to die soon."

"Did you bring up this topic just so you could say that? You do have a year after all, even if reaching their level is impossible, you'd still get pretty good if you practiced."

At my suggestion, she smiled resplendently. It was a smile that looked contagious.

"Yeah! That's true! Maybe I should try it out!"

Thrilled at her prospects for the future, she bought a few items to practice with from a magic goods specialty store within the facility. Throughout her purchase, I didn't get to enter the store. Since she would be performing for me too someday, there'd have been no meaning were I to help her choose - that was the reason why. It couldn't be helped, so I watched the commercial for magic goods playing at the storefront together with some elementary schoolers.

"Aah, maybe with this, I'll emerge like a comet, and have my name passed down to future generations as the legendary magician that suddenly disappeared."

“If you were unbelievably talented, then perhaps.”

“One year of my life is worth five years of other people, so it’ll definitely work out. Look forward to it.”

“Wasn’t the value of a person’s single day unchanging?”

Looking like she was really serious about this, her expression was brimming with greater verve than usual. What made humans shine was the ability to achieve their goals despite their lack of time. Standing next to me, she probably shone much more prominently.

As I walked around the facility with the shining girl, time passed right by. She bought a few articles of clothing. She kept coming to me with cute-looking T-shirts and skirts in hand, and asking me to appraise each and every one of them, but since I didn’t really understand what counted as good or bad in girls’ fashion, I chose to say they suited her - words that contained neither praise nor criticism. Unexpectedly, those words had put her in a good mood, so I was glad. And since I didn’t lie about the clothes suiting her, my heart didn’t feel a twinge of guilt.

We dropped by a shop selling Ultraman goods on the way, and she bought me a soft vinyl figure of a monster that looked like a skeletal dinosaur as a present, but I didn’t understand the meaning behind her choice. When I asked her, she said that it suited me. It didn’t put me in a good mood. In return, I bought her a soft vinyl figure of Ultraman. When I said it suited her, she was put in a good mood like always.

We put the hundred yen soft vinyl figures on our fingers, and after eating some soft serve ice cream, we started to head back to the station. It was just about noon when we reached the station, and we - who had only eaten soft serve ice cream - went to look at souvenirs before getting lunch. Within the compound of the station, there was a large space that sold only souvenirs, and it caught her eye.

While tasting various food items, she bought snacks and specialty fish roe for her family, as well as some snacks for her best friend. I also bought some snacks for myself that had been awarded the gold award by Monde Selection consecutively for years. Since I had only told my family that I was staying over at a friend’s house, I couldn’t bring any souvenirs home. It was a real shame, but this time it couldn’t be helped.

We ate ramen at a different ramen shop from yesterday, and since we had time to spare, we had tea at a cafe before boarding the Shinkansen. I started to get sentimental over the end of the trip.

Even more so than the me of the past who had been taken along by her, I had become somewhat forward-looking.

“Let’s go on another trip - I guess next would be winter.”

The girl that was gazing at the scenery from her window seat said as such. I was a little lost as to how to respond, but in the end, I answered truthfully.

“Yeah, that may be nice too.”

“Ooh, awfully honest of you. So, did you have fun?”

“Yeah, I had fun.”

I had fun. That was how I really felt. I grew up in a laissez-faire household where both my parents were busy, and of course I didn’t have any friends to go on trips with, so I enjoyed myself much more than I’d thought I would.

She made a surprised face for some reason, and after looking at me, she quickly returned to her usual smile and forcefully grabbed onto my arm. Not knowing what to do, I was frightened. Perhaps realising how I felt, she gave a look of embarrassment, then retracted her hand and whispered, “Sorry.”

“What, were you trying to take my pancreas by force?”

“No, it’s just that it’s rare of you to be so honest, so I got carried away. Yeah, I had loads of fun too. Thanks so much, for coming along. I wonder where we should go next. I guess heading north would be nice. I wanna completely relish the cold.”

“Why do you have to treat your body badly? I hate the cold, so I want to escape even further south than this.”

“Waaah, we really do go in different directions!”

Still looking at the girl who had puffed her cheeks out in mock annoyance, I broke the seal of the souvenir I had bought for myself. Having given her a share of the snacks, I bit into the steam bun-type snack myself. The taste of the butter was almost too sweet.

By the time we arrived at the town we lived in, the summer sky had slowly begun to adopt an ultramarine hue. We took a train to our usual station, and rode our bicycles to somewhere near our school before parting ways at the usual place. Since we would meet on Monday anyway, both the girl and I quickly made our farewells and headed down our respective roads home.

When I got home, neither my mother nor my father had returned yet. After properly washing my hands and rinsing my mouth, I stayed in my room. When I lay down on my bed, I was overcome with a sudden wave of sleepiness. While wondering if I was physically tired, sleep-deprived, or perhaps even both, I fell asleep.

I was woken up by my mother when it was time for dinner, and I ate fried noodles while watching television. While most would say that everything up till reaching home could be called a journey, I learnt that in a way, the journey really only ends when I have my usual home-cooked food. I had returned to my everyday life.

For the remainder of the weekend, there was no contact from her at all. Just like always, I stayed in my room reading books, only leaving for a supermarket alone in the afternoon to buy some ice cream. Having spent whatever was left of the two days unremarkably, it was already Sunday night when I had a realisation.

I had been waiting for her to contact me.

When I went to school on Monday, the fact that I had went travelling together with her had spread throughout the class.

I wasn’t sure whether it was related to that, but I discovered my indoor shoes inside a trash can.

Whatever the case, it didn’t seem like I had accidentally dropped the ball.

5

It had been a chain of unusual events since the morning began.

Firstly, my indoor shoes had gone missing just like I had mentioned, but it didn’t stop there.

As per normal, I’d arrived at school and opened my shoe lockers to retrieve my indoor shoes - it happened at the same time I whispered in my heart, “Huh, where did it go?”

“Good morning……”

I was called out to. Apart from that girl, there was no one in my class that would greet me, but since the tension in her voice was so low, I turned around thinking that perhaps her pancreas had broken down, and was met with a surprise.

It was the girl’s Best-Friend-san giving me a look of overt hostility.

I was trembling, but even I, who wasn’t well-versed in social interaction, knew that it would’ve been rude not to reply, and so responded with a reserved “good morning”. She stared me in the eye, gave me a dismissive grunt, and proceeded to change her shoes. But since my shoes were missing, I stood still, not knowing what to do.

While wondering if Best-Friend-san, who had put on her indoor shoes, was going to leave just like that, she looked me in the eyes one more time, and grunted once again. I didn’t get upset. It wasn’t that I necessarily had masochistic interests. It was because I could see the hesitation in her eyes. She must have been unable to decide how to interact with me.

In any case, even if she did carry any hostility, I wanted to express my respect for the girl who had greeted me. If it were me, I would have definitely waited for her to leave the shoe lockers before changing shoes.

I tried looking around the shoe lockers but I couldn’t find my indoor shoes. Expecting that someone had put them on by accident, and would probably return them sooner or later, I headed for my classroom, still wearing my outdoor shoes.

When I entered the classroom, I felt rude gazes from multiple directions, but I ignored them. Maybe they had expected us to come in together, but from the very beginning, I had never bothered to move around with the girl. She hadn’t arrived yet.

I sat myself down on my own seat at the very back, and placed the items I needed from the school-designated bag onto my desk. Our test papers were being returned today, so all I needed were my question papers. In addition, I placed my pencil case and paperback in the space below the desk.

While I was looking through the questions from the tests the other day and thinking about the whereabouts of my indoor shoes, there was a sudden commotion in the classroom. Wondering what had happened, I looked up and saw the girl enter the classroom from the front door, seemingly in a good mood. A number of classmates kicked up a fuss as they greeted her, enclosing her within a circle. Best-Friend-san didn’t enter the circle. She made a troubled face as she looked on at the girl that was caught up in the circle. And then, she took a glance in my direction. Since I had been looking at Best-Friend-san, I immediately averted my eyes.

My attention quickly drifted from the whispers and murmurs of the classmates that had surrounded her. It was because I thought that if it didn’t involve me, it wouldn’t have mattered to me, and if it did involve me, it wouldn’t have been worth bothering with.

I opened my paperback, and took off into the world of literature. The power of concentration I derived from my love of books wouldn’t lose to the noise.

Or so I thought, but I found out that no matter how much I loved books, I would still be dragged out of the world of books if I was spoken to.

The two of us normally didn’t speak to each other at all, so I was surprised. I lifted my head, and in front of me stood a boy who’d demonstrated potential for group cleaning activities. As usual, he was - to put it in a bad way - smiling thoughtlessly.

“Yo, Hot-Topic-Classmate. Erm. Hey, why did ya throw away your indoor shoes?”

“……Huh?”

“I mean didn’t ya did throw them into the toilet trash can? Even though they still look wearable, why? Did you step on dog poop or something?”

“If there was dog poop inside the school, that would be the problem here. But, I see, thanks. It was missing and I was troubled about it.”

“Oh? Alright then, be more careful. Want some gum?”

“No thanks. I’m going out for a bit to collect it.”

“Ah, one more thing, where did ya go with Yamauchi? It’s become another hot topic y'know.”

Thanks to the commotion in the classroom, the seats around us had been vacated, and so, no one else but me heard his straightforward question.

“As I thought, are you guys going out?”

“Nope. We just happened to meet at the station. Wonder who saw us.”

“Hmm, I see. Well if anything interesting happens, let me know!”

While chewing on gum, he returned to his own seat. Though it could probably be said that he was a simple person, I thought of that nature of his as exceedingly kind.

I stood up from my seat, went to the toilet closest to the classroom, and indeed, my indoor shoes were in the trash can. Luckily, there wasn’t any garbage in the trash can that dirtied the shoes, so I put on them on and quietly returned to the classroom. When I entered the room, the atmosphere quietened down for a moment before it got restless again.

Classes ended without any incident. I managed to do okay on the tests I got back. In the front, the girl was making merry over the results with Best-Friend-san, and for a moment, our eyes met. Without any sort of reservation, she showed me her test papers. I couldn’t make them out clearly from afar, but there seemed to be many ticks. Best-Friend-san noticed the girl’s actions and made a troubled expression, so I looked away from her. Beyond that, I didn’t receive any more contact from her that day.

I didn’t make any conversation with her the next day either. If I had to say what happened between me and my classmates, I got glared at by Best-Friend-san once again, and was offered gum by the aforementioned boy. Other than that, there was a personal problem - the pencil case I had bought in a hundred-yen-shop had gone missing.

The opportunity to talk with her for the first time in a few days came on the last day of school before summer vacation. But even if it was called summer

vacation, from the next day onwards, we would have two weeks of supplementary lessons, so today sort of lacked meaning as an ending. That day, we should have gone home right after just the closing ceremony and an administrative brief in class, but I had been asked to help with some after-school work by the teacher in charge of the library. Of course, I was supposed to get the girl - who was also a library committee member - to come along too.

On this rainy Wednesday, for the first time inside the classroom, I was the one to initiate a conversation with her. While she was erasing the blackboard as part of her cleaning duties for the day, I informed her about what we had to do. I could tell that there were a number of gazes directed at us who were at the front of the classroom, but even so, I just ignored them. As for her, she looked like she never minded to begin with.

After school, she said that she was going to lock up the classroom, so I had lunch in the cafeteria on my own first before heading over to the library. Since it was the day of the closing ceremony, there were fewer students than usual in the library.

Our task was to man the counter while the library's teacher-in-charge was out attending a meeting. After Sensei had left the library, I was sitting at the counter reading when two classmates came over to borrow some books. Seemingly disinterested in me, the docile girl asked, "Where's Sakura?" With the same gentle expression and tone that I always saw him use in class, the boy who served as the class representative also asked "Where's Yamauchi-san?" To the two of them, I replied that she was probably in the classroom.

That girl arrived shortly afterwards. As usual, she was wearing a smile that didn't match the weather.

"Yoo-hoo, were you lonely without me?"

"So there are people that say yoo-hoo outside of the mountains, huh. Did you think that there'd be an echo or something? By the way, there were some classmates looking for you."

"Who?"

"Well I'm not really clear on their names. One was a docile girl, and the other was a boy from the class committee."

"Ah, I see, okay okay."

While she said that, she lowered herself with great force onto the swivel chair inside the counter. Its creaking screams resounded throughout the quiet library.

“The chair is crying, you know.”

“Do you think it’s alright to say that to a maiden?”

“I don’t think you’re a maiden though.”

“Ehehehehe, is it really alright to say that? Yesterday, I received a love confession from a boy.”

“……Huh? What’s with that?”

In response to that unexpected event, I was honestly surprised.

Probably satisfied looking at my reaction, she raised the edges of her lips to their limits, and creased the gap between her eyebrows. It was an expression that got on my nerves.

“I got called out after school yesterday, and was confessed to.”

“If that’s true, is it really fine for you to tell me?”

“As for who it was, it’s a shame but, that’s a secret, so - Miffy-chan.”

She made a cross on her lips with both her index fingers.

“Could it be that you’re one of those people that think the cross on Miffy-chan is a mouth? It’s actually split through the middle - the top is the nose and the bottom is the mouth.”

“You’re kidding!”

While I was explaining with a drawing, she cried out with an endlessly troubling loud voice inside the library. Seeing her eyes and mouth opening wide, I was satisfied. The battle for revenge from the dialect trivia had come to an end.

“Wow, I was like, super surprised. It felt like all seventeen years of my life had been a lie. Well never mind that, I got confessed to.”

“Ah, we’re back to that topic. And so?”

“Yeah, I said sorry to him. Why do you think is that?”

“Who knows.”

“Not telling yo~u.”

“Then let me tell you something - when someone says something like ‘who knows’ and ‘hmmm’, it means that that person isn’t very interested in your question. And now, didn’t I say ‘who knows’ or something somewhere along the way?”

It seemed like she wanted to make a rebuttal, but someone had come to borrow a book, so those words were never said. After seriously handling the work at the counter, she changed the topic.

“Oh right, since we can’t play outside on a rainy day like this, you’ll just have to come over to my house today - it’s fine, right?”

“Your house is in the opposite direction from my house so I don’t want to.”

“Don’t turn me down normally with a normal reason! Then it’ll look like you really don’t want to be invited!”

“How vexing, it’s as if you think I don’t mind at all.”

“What- Well it’s not like it matters, you say that sort of thing, but in the end, you’ll still go out to play with me.”

Well, that was probably true. If I was given a proper reason, threatened, or presented with a just cause, I’d end up going along with her invitation. I was a reed boat, unable to go against the flow even if I was presented with a way out – there was no other reason than that.

“Just listen to what I have to say for now. If you listen, then you may even obediently come over to my house.”

“I wonder if you’ll be able to breakthrough my will that’s harder than Fruiche.”

“That means it’s just syrupy though. But Fruiche makes you nostalgic huh, I haven’t eaten it in a while - I should go buy it next time. When I was in elementary school, my mom would make it for me all the time. I love the strawberry one.”

“Hmm, the flow of your thoughts is just like yoghurt too, huh. Seems like it’ll mix quite well with my will.”

“Oho, want to try mixing it?”

She loosened the ribbon of her summer uniform, and undid a button - she must have been feeling hot. Or maybe she was just a fool. Hmm, probably the latter.

“Don’t look at me with such judgemental eyes. Well then, I’m going to get back on-topic - so I’ve told you before that I don’t read books at all.”

“Yeah, though you still read manga.”

“Yup, but I’ve remembered something since then. I basically don’t read books, but there’s just one that I’ve loved ever since I was young. I got it from my dad though. Aren’t you interested?”

“I see, I guess I am unusually interested in that. It’s because I believe that a person’s character can be seen through the books that they love. And I’m interested in what kind of book a human like you would love. So, what book is it?”

After a pretentious pause for effect, she answered.

“It’s ‘The Little Prince’, ever heard of it?”

“The one by Saint-Exupéry?”

“What! You’ve heard of it? No way, since it was a foreign book, I thought that even Get-Along-kun wouldn’t know about it and would be stunned, but I lost.”

She pouted and pushed her weight onto the backrest, looking drained of energy. Once again, a squeaking noise resounded.

“From how you assumed ‘The Little Prince’ isn’t well-known, I can really feel just how uninterested you are in books.”

“I got it so, by the look on your face, that means you’ve read it too? Gah!”

“Nope, it’s a little embarrassing, but I haven’t read it.”

“I see!”

Having suddenly regained her energy, she got up and raised the height of her chair. I raised the height of my chair after her. Naturally, she had a radiant smile plastered on her face. Somehow, I had ended up making her happy.

“Well, I did think that that was probably the case.”

“Don’t you know that you’ll fall into hell if you lie?”

“Since you haven’t read it, I’ll lend you my copy of ‘The Little Prince’, so try giving it a read! Come over to my place today to get it!”

“Couldn’t you just bring it along?”

“You mean you want a girl to carry something heavy?”

“I’ve never read it, but I’m pretty sure it’s just a paperback.”

“Bringing it over to your house would work too.”

“I wonder what happened to it being heavy. Well never mind, I’m tired of having futile arguments with you, and if you’re willing to go as far as coming over to my place, then I’ll be the one to go over.”

This time, that was my just cause.

Truthfully speaking, even this library would probably have had a copy of a book as well-known as the ‘The Little Prince’, but I didn’t want to weirdly ruin the mood of the girl that was a library committee member despite being unfamiliar with books, so I just kept quiet. As for why I hadn’t read a book that famous up till now, even I didn’t know. It was surely an issue of timing.

“Oh, that’s some good situational awareness. Did something happen?”

“I just learnt it from you. That there’s no meaning in a reed boat standing in the way of a large ship.”

“How typical of you, sometimes saying things I don’t understand.”

While I was earnestly explaining the metaphorical expression to her, the library teacher-in-charge returned. As always, we had a chat with Sensei over some tea and snacks, lamenting our misfortune of having to come back to school for two weeks from the next day onwards, then left school for the day.

Outside, thick clouds blanketed the sky - it seemed that today wouldn't be a very sunny day. I didn't dislike rainy days. The sense of being surrounded by rain went together well with how I felt on most days, so I never grew to have negative feelings about the rain.

"Don't you just haaate the rain?"

"……Our feelings really do go in different directions huh."

"Do people that like the rain even exist?"

I was quite sure they did exist. Without answering, I walked ahead of her. I didn't know the precise location of her house, but I knew that it was in the opposite direction from my house, so I just walked in the opposite direction I usually went in from the school gate.

"Have you entered a girl's room before?"

So asked the girl beside me.

"I haven't, but since it's just going to be the room of another high schooler, I'd assume that there isn't anything very interesting about it."

"Well I guess you got it right. My room is pretty simple. Kyouko's room has a bunch of band posters and stuff, so it looks even more boyish than a boy's. As for Hina who you're so interested in, her room is full of stuffed animals and cute things. That's right, maybe next time we should go somewhere with Hina?"

"I'll have to pass. Since I get nervous around pretty girls, and won't be able to speak properly."

"Putting it that way makes it sound like you're saying I'm not cute, but there's no use, since I haven't forgotten that night when you said I was third cutest."

"Though you seem not to be aware that you were only one of the three faces I could recall."

Well, that was a bit of an exaggeration, but I really didn't remember all my classmates' faces. I didn't interact with people much, so I guess my ability to remember faces had fallen behind since I never really needed to use it. Races in which one had no choice but to participate in shouldn't count.

Her house was about the same distance as mine was from school. Mixed into the neighbourhood where large houses lined up in rows was one with cream-coloured walls and a red roof - that was the one she lived in.

Since she was around, naturally, we stepped in through the front gate in a dignified manner. As there was some distance between the entrance and the door, there was also a slight time lag between entering the premises and closing our umbrellas.

Invited inside by the girl, I escaped from the rain like a water-averse cat.

“I’m home!!”

“Sorry to intrude.”

In accordance to her energetic return-home greeting, I reservedly offered a few words. The last memory I had of meeting a classmate’s parents was when I participated in a class visit in elementary school, so needless to say, I got nervous.

“My family isn’t around though.”

“……Only people that are weird in the head will energetically greet an unoccupied space you know.”

“I was greeting my house. After all, it’s the precious place I was brought up in.”

I was at a loss for a reply to the girl that said decent things from time to time. Once again, I said, “Sorry to intrude” - this time to the house, and I took my shoes off after her.

She went to switch on the electricity, and it looked like her home came to life. I went along with her to the washroom to get our hands cleaned and mouths rinsed, and then we headed to her room on the second floor.

The first girl’s room that I had been welcomed into was - in a word - large. What was? Everything. The room itself, the television, the bed, the bookshelf, and the computer. I was envious, or so I was for a second; when I thought that it was all in direct proportion to her parents’ sorrow, my yearning promptly vanished. If anything, it was as if the room was filled with emptiness.

“Sit anywhere you like, you can get in the bed if you’re feeling sleepy too. I’ll tell Kyouko though.”

After saying so, she sat herself down on the red swivel chair in front of the desk and started to spin around. A little lost, I sat down on the bed. My body bounced back up due to the springiness of the bed.

I took another look around the inside of the room. Just like she had said, it was simple, but it was set apart from my room by its large size, the cuteness of the ornaments, and the contents of her bookshelf. Her bookshelf was filled exclusively with manga. There were popular shonen manga as well as plenty of manga that I didn't know of lined up on the bookshelf.

Eventually she came to a stop with all her spinning, and looking unwell, coughed violently with her head lowered. I was watching on with frozen eyes when she suddenly lifted her head.

"What should we play? Truth or Dare?"

"Aren't you going to lend me the book? That's what I came here for."

"You should relax, or you're going to die before me, whose life expectancy has already been cut short."

I frowned at the girl who had cast a curse on me, while she twisted her lips and made a weird face. It was like a game where whoever got annoyed would lose. Though it looked like I lost right away.

She casually stood up and approached the bookshelf, making me wonder if she finally got into the mood to retrieve 'The Little Prince', but instead, she took out a foldable shogi board from a drawer on the lowest shelf.

"Let's give it a go - a friend forgot about it, but never came back to collect it."

Since I didn't really have a reason to turn her down, I took her up on the invitation.

In the end, I emerged victorious from a tedious, confused, and long-drawn-out game of shogi. Honestly, I thought I could have achieved an overwhelming victory. However, tsume-shogi and matches with an actual opponent had different conditions, so I couldn't really get into a good rhythm. Just as I was about to put her in checkmate, she frustratedly flipped over the shogi board. Hey.

While picking up the shogi pieces that had been scattered all over the bed, I looked outside, and saw that the rain was still pouring fiercely.

“You can go home once the rain lightens up a bit. So let’s keep playing until then.”

While speaking as if she had seen through my heart, she kept the shogi board, and this time, brought out a television game.

I did have experience playing television games, but it had been quite some time since I had last touched one.

At first, we played a fighting game. Just by mashing the controller buttons, the human inside the screen would easily wound the opponent - it really was heinous, something like deriving joy from hurting others.

Since I normally almost didn’t play games at all, I was given a little time to practice. I looked at the screen as I manipulated the controller, while she gave me various advice on the game. I thought that she would probably go easy on me, but I had been completely mistaken. The moment the match began - thirsty for vengeance for the shogi match from earlier - she activated some technique that changed the colour of the screen and unleashed a strange wave of energy from her human, making a rag doll of my character.

But, I wasn’t one to just sit idly by. Beginning my counterattack, I recalled a trick, dodged my opponent’s attack, and so that I was able to throw my opponent that was blocking, I pretended to make a mistake to draw her from defence into an all-out attack. Just as the winning stars I had lined up were rivalling hers in number, and it looked as if I was about to win, she cut the power. Come on, hey.

She looked at me with an accusatory glare - which didn’t really faze me - and quickly switched games before rebooting the console.

She owned various games, and we went head-to-head in several of them, but the showdown I liked best was the racing game. While it was a two-player contest, it was ultimately a battle against time, and thus a battle against myself, perhaps making it a game that matched my personality.

We played the racing game on the large television, repeatedly pulling ahead of each other. Never having been one to speak much, I wordlessly concentrated on the game. On the other hand, she wouldn’t stop going “aah!” and “agh!” - if I subtracted that from all the noise in the world, I was sure I would get a zero.

It was only when we had entered the final lap that she spoke with an intention other than distracting me.

She asked me a question. It was one that I had already become desensitised to.

“Get-Along-kun, don’t you feel like getting a girlfriend?”

I responded to her while avoiding a banana on the screen.

“It’s not about whether I want to get one or not. Since I don’t even have friends.”

“Then girlfriend aside, you should make some friends.”

“Maybe if I feel like it.”

“If you feel like it, huh. Hmm, y'know.”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t feel like making me your girlfriend, right?”

In response to her absurd full-frontal specialty attack - which could have been part of her strategy - I turned towards her without thinking, and ended up crashing spectacularly on-screen.

“Wahaha, you crashed!”

“……Just what are you saying.”

“Ah, the girlfriend thing? I’m just making sure. You don’t like me or anything, right? No matter what happens, you won’t feel like making me your girlfriend, right?”

“…….I won’t.”

“That’s great, I’m relieved.”

“…….”

What was she relieved about? I thought that it was strange.

I tried figuring it out from the context.

Perhaps, unexpectedly, she suspected that I secretly wanted the relationship between us to become one of lovers.

After all, I had shared accommodation with her, and had now been invited into her room - maybe she was afraid that I had misunderstood and fallen for her.

It was an unwarranted, groundless charge.

Uncharacteristically of me, I started to feel truly unpleasant. Specifically, I felt as though something terrible had accumulated at the bottom of my stomach.

Once the race was over, we put down our controllers.

“Well, pass me the book. It’s about time for me to go.”

The emotions that had taken root deep within my gut refused to fade. So that she wouldn’t find out, I decided to escape as soon as possible.

I stood up and walked over to the bookshelf. The rain hadn’t lightened up at all.

“Even though you could have just taken your time. Give me a moment then.”

She got up from her chair too, and came over to the bookshelf. She stood behind me, close enough that I could hear each breath she took. Somehow, her breathing felt rougher than usual.

Not minding her, I started looking through her bookshelf from the top. Perhaps she was looking for the book in a similar manner. I got a little irritated; she should have just left it in a designated spot from the beginning.

After a short while, I heard her breaths turn heavy. Her arm extended into my peripheral vision. I thought that she had somehow found it first. That wasn’t it - I should have understood at this stage. Because I could see both her arms at the edges of my field of vision.

And right after that, I lost track of where I even was.

Probably due to the fact that I had pretty much never received aggressive body contact from anyone, I couldn’t immediately grasp what had happened to myself.

When I had realised it, my back had been pushed against the wall by the bookshelf. My left hand was free, but my right hand was being gripped against the wall at shoulder height. Even closer than before were breaths and heartbeats that weren't mine. Heat too, and an unduly sweet scent. She had wrapped her right arm around my neck. I couldn't see her face; her mouth was right beside my ear. It was a distance in which it felt like our cheeks could touch. And from time to time, they did touch.

Just what was she doing? I opened my mouth, but no words came out.

"……I made a memo of something I wanted to do before I die, remember?"

She whispered into my ear. Her voice and breath lingered on my earlobe. She hadn't expected a response.

"So that I could carry it out, I checked if you wanted to make me your girlfriend."

Her black hair was swaying right before my nose.

"The reason I called you over to my home was that too."

I got the feeling that she giggled.

"Thanks for saying that you didn't. It was a relief. If you said you did, I wouldn't be able to achieve my goal."

I could understand neither her words nor the situation.

"Want I want to do is, you see-"

Too sweet.

"To do something that shouldn't be done with a boy that isn't my lover, or even the person I like."

Something that shouldn't be done, something that shouldn't be done?

Her words raced incessantly within my head. Something that shouldn't be done – just what could it be? Was she talking about the current situation, something in the future, or perhaps even one of the things we had done up till now? I thought that all of them were correct answers. All of them were things that shouldn't be done. My finding out about her illness, her spending the time before her death with me even though she didn't even like me, us spending the night together, and my entering her room - if she

was talking about something that shouldn't have been done, it felt like it could've been any one of the above.

"This is a hug. And so, starting from right now, this is something that shouldn't be done."

As before, she said so looking like she had seen through my heart. Perhaps sharing the same heartbeat made it easy to read my heart. But I couldn't read her heart at all.

What should I do?

"It's fine if it's ?????-kun."

"……"

"Something that shouldn't be done."

I didn't know the right way to respond, and I couldn't understand at all, but I used my free left hand to remove the arm hanging around my neck. I pushed her body away from me, and both the breaths and heartbeats were gone. In their stead, appearing before me was her face - flushed red even though she hadn't drunk any liqueur.

Having seen my face, she made a surprised expression. Unlike her, I was unable to make faces for other people to see, so I myself didn't know what sort of face I was making. I just weakly shook my head from side to side. I didn't even know what I was refusing.

We looked into each other's eyes. The silence clung on.

I examined her expression. Her eyes darted about restlessly, settling to look somewhere away from me. Then she slowly and reservedly raised the corners of her lips, and looked at me.

And then, all of a sudden, she let it out.

"Aha-"

"……"

"Ahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha, ju~st kidding."

So said the girl, now with a full-faced smile. She released her grip on my right arm, shook off my hand, and remained roaring with laughter like that.

“Aaaaah, how embarrassing. It’s just a joke, just a joke! The same mischief as usual. Don’t create such an embarrassing atmosphere, sheesh.”

Her sudden change left me stunned.

“Waaah, this took courage y’know. I even ended up hugging you. But, in the end, it’s real even if it’s just mischief, huh. I gave it my all, yup. Not to mention, you got all quiet so the atmosphere felt like it was the real deal. Did I get your heart racing? I’m glad you told me that you didn’t like me, otherwise it’d have started feeling serious! But my mischief was a great success huh! It’s because it was you that I was able to do it - that was sooo thrilling.”

I didn’t understand the reason. I wonder why?

But, aah, since I met her, this was the first time.

The first time I was seriously angered by a prank of hers.

The anger directed at the girl - who kept on talking like it would shake off the embarrassment that had been dealt upon me - slowly began to take form within my gut, until it could no longer be digested.

Just what did she think I was? I felt that I had been insulted, and that was probably the truth of the matter as well.

If she said that this was socialising, then just like I had thought, I wanted to live without being involved with others. Everyone could just die of some pancreatic illness and disappear. No, I would eat them. I, the only righteous one, would eat everybody else’s pancreata.

Emotions and actions were surprisingly deeply intertwined.

The inside of my ears were blocked with swelling anger. I didn’t register her scream.

I grasped the shoulders of the girl before my eyes, and pushed her onto the bed.

Her upper body collapsed onto the bed. Letting go of her shoulders, I grabbed hold of both her arms so that they couldn’t move. My mind was blank.

Finally recognising the situation, she struggled a little to move, but soon gave up; she looked at my face, casting a shadow upon her own. As always, I didn't know what sort of face I was making.

"Get-Along-kun?"

She was bewildered.

"What's wrong? Let go, it hurts."

I stayed silent, only looking her in the eyes.

"What happened just now was a joke y'know? Hey, I was just playing around like usual."

Just what would satisfy me? I didn't even know myself. Or perhaps, I had had enough.

While I continued to not utter a single word, her face that was rich with expressions, her face that she wore on her body for a life of socialising with others, began to change, going round and round like that time before.

She laughed.

"Ehehe, did you get on board with my joke? This is some pretty good service from you! Now, it's about time to let go."

She got troubled.

"Hey, heeey, what's wrong? This isn't like you, Get-Along-kun. You're not the kind of person who'd pull this kind of prank right? Hey, let go."

She got angry.

"Enough already! Do you think it's alright to do this sort of thing to a girl? Hurry up and let go of me!"

I, most likely with eyes filled with apathy, continued to look straight at her. She didn't try to evade my gaze either. Staring at each other on top of a bed - things couldn't get any more romantic.

Before long, she, too, ceased to say anything. Only the fierce sound of the pouring rain seemed to condemn me through the window. I didn't know why the sounds of her breathing and blinking could be heard.

I continued to stare at her. And she stared back at me too.

That was why - I understood.

Wordlessly, within the eyes of the girl whose expressions had stopped changing, tears welled up.

And as soon as I saw that, my anger - of which I didn't even know the source - melted away like I had never been mad.

As my temper began to dissipate, from the depths of my guts, I could feel my regrets beginning to churn.

I gently let go of her arms, and stood up. She looked at me with a befuddled expression. Having recognised that, I stopped looking at her face.

"Sorry……"

I didn't hear a response. She was still on the bed, lying in the same position as when I had pushed her down.

I grabbed the belongings I had left on the bed. Then, in order to escape, I gripped the door knob.

"……Horrible-Classmate-kun."

Hesitating for just a moment because of the voice from behind, I responded without turning around.

"Sorry, I'm going home now."

With just those words, I opened the door of the room I would probably never again return to, and with quick steps, slipped away. No one came chasing after me.

I stepped into the rain, leaving the door unlocked, and after walking a few steps, realised that the rain was wetting my hair. I unhurriedly put up my umbrella, and exited onto the road. The scent of summer rain rose from the asphalt.

I rebuked myself for wanting to turn around, and continued to walk as I recalled the path to school. The rain grew stronger.

I was thinking. I, who had finally regained my composure, was thinking.

I thought as much as I could think, but I could see nothing but regrets inside my heart.

Baffled as to why I would do something like that, I was utterly disappointed with myself.

I didn’t know the target of my anger. I didn’t know that I could hurt someone like that. And I didn’t know that I could be hurt like this.

I saw her face. I saw the tears. I was overrun by emotion. My thoughts - my regrets - had run wild within me.

I noticed that I was clenching my teeth. My gums began to hurt when I became conscious of it. To think that the day would come when I would inflict pain on my own body because of human relationships - I had become strange. But if I thought of this pain as a punishment for myself, then I hadn’t lost my sanity. Even so, my sins wouldn’t be wiped away.

It was all because of what she had called mischief. It had rubbed me the wrong way. It was the truth, but even if it was the truth, it was no excuse to get physically violent with her. It didn’t matter even if I, regardless of her intentions, got hurt. Got hurt, I got hurt? Just what had I gotten hurt about? Although I could remember her scent and heartbeat, I couldn’t understand what they meant. Somehow, I just couldn’t forgive myself. With senseless emotion, I had hurt her.

I cut a path in-between some large houses. It was a weekday afternoon, and there was not a soul in sight.

Surely, if I were to suddenly disappear, no one would notice.

Having gone silent at the thought, a voice from behind shocked me back to my senses.

“Unremarkable-Classmate-kun.”

It was the calm voice of a male. I promptly turned around, and there stood a classmate under an umbrella. Up till he called out to me, I hadn’t noticed his presence at all. I thought it was strange. First was the fact that he called out to me. Second was how he expressed an emotion that resembled anger, even though he had always left the impression of having a gentle smile.

Speaking to him now made this the second time today. How rare of me to exchange words with the same human twice in one day.

He was a boy that gave off a sense of warmth and neatness - our class representative. Thinking of finding out with what sort of heart did that kind of boy involve himself with me, I shook off my reservations about how I had nothing to do with him, and called back out to him, “Hey.”

Though I expected a response, he just glared at me silently. It couldn’t be helped, so I opened my mouth again.

“So you live around here, huh.”

“……I don’t.”

As I thought, he really seemed to be in a bad mood. Maybe he too disliked the rain. After all, when it rained, the amount of baggage would increase and get in the way. Then again, he was wearing only casual clothing right now, and wasn’t carrying anything apart from his umbrella.

I looked at his face. Recently, I’d finally learned how to read a person’s emotions from their eyes. In order to search for the reason why he was so upset that he had to come talk to me, I somehow or another met his gaze.

I didn’t speak again. That was why, as I calmed my own feelings and silently looked at his face, he got impatient first. With a face that looked like he just swallowed a bitter bug, he called out to me.

“The same goes for Unremarkable-Classmate - why are you in this sort of place?”

I wasn’t particularly concerned about how, unlike usual, he addressed me without any honorifics. Even more than that, how he called me Unremarkable-Classmate like I was something else weighed on my mind. Like Unforgivable-Enemy for example. Anyhow, I didn’t know the reason, so I left it as it was.

I didn’t answer, so he clicked his tongue.

“I asked why Unforgivable-Enemy is in this sort of place.”

“……I had some business to attend to.”

“It’s Sakura right?”

I could feel my heart squeeze at that familiar name. It got painful to breath and I couldn’t answer right away. He didn’t let that go either.

“I said, it’s Sakura, right?”

“……”

“Answer me!

“……If the Sakura you’re talking about is the same person as that girl in our class, then you’re right.”

My faint hopes that perhaps it was a misunderstanding on his part were shattered by the expression he made as he ground his teeth. With that, I could decisively state that he was facing me with rather unfriendly emotions. It’s just that I still didn’t understand the reason for his emotions.

What should I do?

But that thought of mine became meaningless right away. Soon enough, I learnt it through the words of he himself.

“Why is Sakura-”

“……”

“Why is Sakura together with someone like you?”

Ah, I understood.

The understanding that could almost be put into words - I consciously clung onto it. I understood. The true form of the emotions he was facing me with. Without thinking, I scratched my head. I thought something along the lines of how this seemed troublesome.

If he were properly looking with his eyes, any number of excuses or explanations would probably prove effective, but he had been made blind by his own misdirected anger.

Perhaps, running into each other today at this place wasn’t a coincidence; I could imagine countless situations, such as him following the two of us.

He was probably in love. And consequently, he was facing me with misguided jealousy. He was blinded, and had thus lost his ability to observe, as well as to view himself objectively. It was likely that he had lost other things too.

For now, I tried to explain the truth - what I thought was the best course of action.

“She and I don’t have the sort of relationship that you’re imagining.”

When I said so, his eyes became bloodshot. By the time I wondered if this was bad, it was too late - he condemned me with a more aggressive volume and tone. He managed to drown out the sound of the rain.

“Then, tell me just what you two are! Having a meal and going on a trip alone with her, and then today, you alone went to that girl’s house to play - it’s become a hot topic in class! That you suddenly began following her around.”

I got a little interested as to how the stuff about our trip got leaked out.

“It may appear like I’ve been following her around, but I don’t think that’s accurate. Having said that, saying that I was letting her go out with me is arrogant, and saying that she was letting me go out with her is too modest. Just because we’ve been going out, it doesn’t really mean that we’re lovers.”

I confirmed that his face moved at the words “go out”, and so I clarified myself further.

“Anyway, we don’t have the sort of relationship you or the class think we do.”

“Even so, Sakura has been spending time with you.”

“……I guess so.”

“With a fellow that’s nothing but anti-social and gloomy like you!”

I didn’t have any particular objections against what he had hatefully said about my nature as a human. It probably looked like that, and it probably was the truth.

As for why she would spend time together with me, that was what I wanted to know. She had said that I was the only existence that could give her both an everyday and reality, but though it was believable, I got the feeling that something would come undone if I used that as an answer.

And so, I silently glared at him. He too, stood in the rain with a heated gaze and hardened expression.

The silence continued for a long time. Since it went on for so long, I thought that our conversation had come to an end. He too seemed to notice his unjustified anger towards me, and had perhaps been struck by regret like I had been earlier. Or maybe that wasn't the case. Since he was blinded, he may not have been able to see his own emotions.

In the end, it didn't matter which it was. Whatever the case, there was probably nothing to gain from us facing each other any more than this, and so, I turned my back to him. I did so because I thought he would let me go. Of perhaps, I just wanted to be alone as soon as possible. It didn't matter which it was either. My course of action wouldn't change.

Thinking about it carefully, I only knew of humans in love being blinded in stories, and having never touched a real human's heart, it was presumptuous of me to try reading a living human being's actions. Characters in stories were different from real humans. Stories and reality were different. Reality wasn't as beautiful or as graceful as stories.

Walking in a direction where there were no humans around, I could feel the weight of his piercing gaze on my back. I refused to turn around. Because even if I did, it wouldn't benefit anyone. I wanted the boy behind me to understand that there was no way she would like me, a person that thought about human relationships in the same manner he did of math, but it was pointless.

Unaware that love wasn't the only thing that blinded people, and that thinking could blind too, I hadn't realised that the boy behind me had come chasing after me until he grabbed onto my shoulder.

"Wait!"

Since it couldn't be helped, I turned only my head. The misunderstanding aside, I was a little fed up with his attitude. But I didn't show it in my expression.

"We're not done talking!"

Thinking about it, I may have gotten worked up as well. This was pretty much my first experience getting into a so-called quarrel. To have emotions clash, and to lose the part of me that could think rationally.

Words that would clearly hurt him came out of my mouth.

"Hey, let me tell you one thing. It'll probably be helpful."

I took a firm look into his eyes, with the intention of emptying out my gut.

“That girl seems to dislike obstinate humans. It looks like her previous boyfriend was one.”

The last I saw of his face that was right next to mine, it had twisted to a level I hadn’t yet seen in the past few minutes. I didn’t know what that expression meant, but it didn’t matter. Even if I had understood, the result wouldn’t have changed.

I received a strong impact to my left eye, and having lost my balance due to its momentum, I fell on my behind on the rain-drenched asphalt. The rain quickly soaked into my uniform. Still open, the umbrella that had fallen from my hand made a dull sound and rolled about. The bag I had let go of at the same time lay on the ground. Surprised by the situation that I had been put in, I promptly turned to his direction. My left eye was blurry and couldn’t see very well.

I didn’t know the details, but I knew that I had been dealt with violence. People didn’t just fall of their own will.

“What do you mean by obstinate! I, I just-”

So he said. He was facing me, but those words clearly weren’t directed at me. I knew that I had brought down his wrath. I thought of hurting him, so it served me right that I got hurt. I reflected deeply upon myself.

This really was the first time that I had been hit by a person. It hurt quite a bit. I understood that it hurt where I had been hit, but for some reason, the core of my heart was in pain too. If this continued, my heart as a person may even break.

Still seated on the ground, I looked up at him. My left eye’s vision had yet to return.

He didn’t definitively say it, so I couldn’t make any conclusions at this juncture, but he was probably her lover from before. Breathing roughly, he looked down at me.

“A fellow like you should stay away from Sakura!”

As he said so, he took out something from his pocket and threw it at me. It had been crumpled, but spreading it open, I recognised it as the bookmark I had lost some time ago. I got it - I could imagine the flow of events.

“So it was you.”

He didn’t reply.

I had thought that there was a gentle nature behind those shapely features. When he stood in front of the class to lead a discussion, and when he sometimes came to the library to borrow books, he would sprinkle a well-rounded smile. But all I, who didn’t know of his inner face, had been seeing was something that he had carefully prepared to show the outside world. As expected, it wasn’t the appearance, but the substance that was important.

I wondered what I should do. It was me who had hurt him first, so I couldn’t say that his attack wasn’t in self-defence. I did feel that it was somewhat excessive, but I couldn’t understand just how much he had been hurt. That was why I felt that it would’ve been strange to stand up and strike back against him.

It looked like the blood had yet to recede from his head. It would have been good if there was a method to calm him down, but if I chose the wrong words – no, even if I didn’t choose the wrong ones, I’d probably end up adding oil to the fire. Without a doubt, it was because to him, I had crossed a line somewhere emotionally.

I looked at him. I was beginning to think that he was much more in the right than I was. He must have really liked her a lot. His methods may have been a little wrong, or rather, those methods were the problem, but he faced her with straightforward feelings, and wished to spend time together with her.

That was why he resented me, who had taken away her time. Whereas for me, if I hadn’t found out that she would die in a year - eating with her, going on a trip with her, going to her house and having things become awkward - I wouldn’t have done any of that. Her dying was what bound us together. But, death was a fate that would befall everyone. That was why, meeting with her was a coincidence. Us spending time together was a coincidence. There was no will, or urgency of emotions on my part at all.

Even I, who didn’t involve myself with people, knew that those in the wrong had to give in to those who were right.

I got it. In that case, I’d let him have his way until he was satisfied. I, who tried to have a relationship with someone without even knowing how people felt, was in the wrong.

I firmly met his glare, and was going to convey my intention to him. I was going to convey my intention to submit to him. But I was no match for her.

Behind the boy whose chest heaved with every breath, I spied a figure standing.

“What are you doing……?”

Thunderstruck, he turned to face the voice.

His umbrella wavered, and the falling raindrops began to dot his shoulders. Not knowing if it was good or bad timing, I watched the two of them as if it were someone else’s affairs.

The girl who was carrying an umbrella, probably trying to grasp the situation, looked back and forth between his face and mine countless times.

He tried to say something. But before he could speak a word, the girl rushed to my side, picked up the fallen umbrella, and offered it to me.

“You’re gonna catch a cold, Horrible-Classmate-kun……”

When I accepted her somewhat off-the-mark kindness, I could hear her gasp.

“Horrible-Classmate-kun! Blood, blood is coming out!”

Looking distraught, she produced a handkerchief from her pocket and held it to my left eye. I hadn’t known that I was bleeding. So his violence may not have come from his bare hands. But I didn’t want to know the identity of the weapon right now.

Even more important than that, I saw the expression of the stunned boy after she rushed to my side. The degree of that change was beyond description. It made me think that this was what it meant to have emotions overflow and spill over.

“What’s wrong?” “Why’s there blood-” The girl continued. My eyes had been taken hostage by his emotions, so her concern fell on deaf ears, but that wasn’t a problem. He provided the explanation.

“Sakura…… Why are you helping that sort of fellow……”

With her handkerchief still lightly pushed against my left eye, she turned to face him. His expression, probably because he saw her face, became even more twisted.

“That sort of fellow…… What…… You mean Horrible-Classmate-kun?”

“That’s right, that fellow was following Sakura around, so to make sure that he wouldn’t meddle anymore, I hit him.”

He said so to justify his actions. He probably thought that it would get her to see him in a better light. He probably wanted her to look at him once again. The blinded boy could no longer see her heart.

I, who had become a complete bystander, silently observed the developments. Frozen in place, she stared him in the face. Only her arms were extended to hold her handkerchief against my face. Like a child that wanted to be praised, half of him was smiling. The other half was engulfed by fear.

A few seconds later, his face shifted to the latter.

Like she was vomiting out the emotions that had accumulated inside her stomach in the time she had stopped moving, she delivered to him just one line.

“……You’re the worst.”

The shock from her words wrecked his face.

Soon, she turned back to me. Her face surprised me. I had misunderstood that her rich variety of expressions were inherently bright. I thought that even when she got angry, even when she cried, they were still bright. I had misunderstood.

Even she could make this sort of face.

The sort that looked like it was meant to hurt someone.

Her expression changed right away when she faced me; confusion was mixed together with a smile. I stood up at her cue. Both my pants and jersey were completely soaked, so I was glad that it was summer. It wasn’t cold, thanks to the summer air, and her holding onto my arm.

Pulling strongly on my arm, she walked in his direction. I looked at his face. I saw the devastation, and was convinced that he probably wouldn’t steal my things anymore after this.

We passed by him, and though I expected her to keep pulling us along, I abruptly bumped into her when she came to a halt. Our umbrellas bounced off each other, sending a spray of water flying.

Without turning around, she spoke calmly in a loud voice.

“I’ve come to hate Takahiro now. So don’t ever do anything to me or the people around me ever again.”

The boy called Takahiro didn’t say anything. When I at last looked at his back, it seemed like he was crying.

Afterwards, I was pulled to her house. There, I was wordlessly handed a towel and a change of clothes, and told to take a shower. Without hesitation, I did as she said. I borrowed a men’s T-shirt, pair of underwear, and jersey, and learnt for the first time that she had a much older brother. I hadn’t even known the structure of her family.

After changing, I was called to her room on the second floor. There I saw her atop her bed, sitting in seiza.

From there, I experienced it for the first time in my life with her. I, who rarely involved himself with people, didn’t know what it was. Which is why I am borrowing her words.

She called it making up.

That, even more than any of the involvements I’ve had with humans up till now, made me itch with embarrassment.

She apologised to me. I apologised to her too. She explained herself to me. She’d thought I’d make a troubled face and laugh. That was why I explained myself too. For some reason I didn’t understand, I’d gotten the feeling that I had been made a fool of, and got offended. She had come chasing me in the rain because she absolutely didn’t want things to turn sour between us, and the reason she cried after I pushed her down was purely because she was afraid of a boy’s strength - that was what I heard.

Sincerely, I apologised from the bottom of my heart.

I talked about what interested me in the boy that had been left behind in the rain. Our class representative, as I had thought, was her previous lover. I truthfully said what had come to mind in the middle of the rain. That rather than being with me, it would be better for her to be with someone who

seriously thought of her. Because us meeting at the hospital that day was nothing but a mere coincidence.

She scolded me in return.

“That’s not it. It’s not a coincidence. The two of us, and everyone else, have come this far through the choices we ourselves have made. You and I being in the same class, and meeting in the hospital that day too - they weren’t coincidences. It wasn’t anything like fate either. The choices that you’ve made up till now, and the choices that I’ve made up till now, were what let us meet. We met each other out of our own free wills.”

I kept mum. I didn’t say a thing. I really had much to learn from her. If she didn’t have one year left, if she had even longer, could I ever teach her anything beyond what she had taught me? No, no matter how much time there was left, it surely wouldn’t be enough.

After having borrowed a bag for my uniform, as well as some clothes, I was lent the book I had been promised. Since I read books in the order I obtained them, it would take some time to finish the books already stacked on my bookshelf. When I informed her of this, she said that it would be fine for me to return it in a year. In other words, I had vowed to get along with her until she died.

The next day when I headed to school for supplementary lessons, I found that my indoor shoes hadn’t disappeared.

I went to the classroom wearing indoor shoes for the first time in a while, and found that she wasn’t around. Even when it was time for first period, she hadn’t come to school. The next period, and the period after that too. Even when classes had come to an end, she was nowhere to be seen.

As for why she hadn’t come, I only learnt about it that night.

She had been hospitalised.

6

The girl had been hospitalised. The next time I saw her was Saturday that same week, in a hospital ward. The weather in the morning was cloudy, and the temperature pleasant. Having been informed of the visiting hours, I had come to pay her a so-called hospital visit, or rather, I had been summoned.

She was in a private ward. There weren't any other visitors when I arrived. Dressed in a typical hospital gown with a tube hanging from her arm, was the girl facing the window doing some weird dance. When I called out to her from behind, she jumped up in shock and squealed noisily as she burrowed under her blanket. I sat down on the pipe chair that had been left beside the bed, waiting for the commotion to end. All of a sudden, she became quiet and sat back up on the bed as if nothing had happened. Her paroxysms knew neither time nor place.

"Don't appear so suddenly, I was so embarrassed just now I thought I was going to die."

"If you're going to die in such an unprecedented manner, let me present you with something that'll make you laugh for the rest of your life. Here, a visiting gift."

"Huh, you didn't have to! Ah, they're strawberries! Let's eat them. The plates and stuff are in the rack over there so go get them."

Just as she had ordered, I retrieved two sets of plates and forks, as well as a knife, from the nearby white rack, and seated myself back on the chair. Incidentally, the strawberries had been bought with money my parents had given me after I'd told them I was going to the hospital to visit a classmate.

After removing the stems, I inquired about her condition as we ate the strawberries.

"It's totally alright. The numbers were a bit weird, so my dad and mom were worried and fussing about getting me hospitalised, but I'm pretty much doing fine. I'll be hospitalised for about two weeks, have some special drug inserted into my body, and after that I'll be back in school."

"By then it would already be summer vacation though."

“Ah, that’s true. Then I’ve got to make plans for summer vacation with you huh.”

I looked at the end of the tube that extended from her arm. A bag containing transparent liquid hung from an iron pole that had casters attached. A single doubt came to mind.

“What did you tell others like Best-Friend-san, I mean, Kyouko-san?”

“I told Kyouko and the others that I had an appendix surgery. The hospital side is also covering it up for me. It looks like they’re quite worried for me, so it’s getting harder and harder to tell the truth y'know. What does Get-Along-kun, who pushed me down onto a bed a few days ago, think?”

“Hmm, I think you should properly tell Best-Friend-san, I mean, Kyouko-san one day though. But ultimately, I guess I should respect what you, who hugged me a few days ago, decide to do.”

“Don’t make me remember that! It’s so embarrassing! Before I die, I’m going to tell Kyouko about how you pushed me down, and then you’ll get killed without anyone knowing.”

“You’re actually going to turn your best friend into a criminal, the sin runs deep within you.”

“That said, what do you even mean by ‘Best-Friend-san’?”

“I refer to Kyouko-san as Best-Friend-san in my mind. In a familiar manner.”

“All I hear are formalities though. You mean it like ‘Section-Chief-san’, right?”

Appalled, she shrugged. She didn’t look the least bit different from how she usually did.

I had asked about her condition through our messages, but I was relieved to see that she really was doing fine. The truth was, I’d feared that the time of her death had suddenly been pushed forward. But as far as I could tell from looking at her, that didn’t seem to be the case. Her expression was bright and her movements were robust.

Having regained some peace of mind, I took out a newly bought, untouched notebook from my bag.

“Well then, now that you’re done with your snack, it’s time to study.”

“Whaaat, let’s just take it easy for a little longer!”

“I came here because you asked me to do this. Not to mention, you’ve already been taking it easy over here the entire time.”

Of course, there was a legitimate reason for me to come to the hospital apart from meeting her for the first time in a while. She had asked me to compile the materials taught during the supplementary lessons in the several days that she wasn’t going to school, and tutor her. She was shocked by how awfully honest I was when I promptly accepted her request. Honestly, how rude of her.

I handed her the new notebook, grabbed a pen, and imparted to her the summarised contents of the supplementary lessons. I cut out the parts I subjectively felt were fine not to remember, and gave an abridged lesson. She listened seriously for the most part. Including breaks, my mock lesson ended after about an hour and a half.

“Thanks so much, Get-Along-kun, you’re good at teaching huh, you should go become a teacher.”

“I don’t want to. And why do you only suggest jobs that will get me involved with humans?”

“I thought that maybe, in my stead, I’d have you do the things I actually wanted to do if I weren’t going to die.”

“If you say something like that, it’ll make me look bad for flat out refusing, so please stop.”

Giggling, she placed the notebook on the brown rack beside the bed. There were reading materials like magazines and manga lined up on its shelves. Surely, to an active human like her, this room must have been boring. After all, she was doing that weird dance earlier too.

It was late in the morning. Having been informed that Best-Friend-san was coming to visit around noon, I had meant to head home at 12 PM. When I told her about this, she gave me an invitation, “You could just join in the girls’ talk,” to which I politely refused. Playing teacher had left my stomach pretty empty, and more than anything, just confirming that she was fine had left me satisfied for the day.

“Then, before you go home - a magic trick, take a look at my magic trick.”

“Ooh, you’ve already picked it up?”

“Just a simple one. Though there are a couple others that I’m still working on.”

What she showcased was a magic trick that made use of poker cards. It was to - without looking - pick the card that the participant had chosen; I thought that it was well done given that she had learnt it in this short of a timespan. Since I had never studied magic tricks, I couldn’t understand the trick.

“I’m going to do an even harder one next time, so look forward to it!”

“I’ll look forward to it; maybe for your final magic trick, you should escape from a burning box.”

“You mean at a crematorium? That’s impossible you knooow.”

“Like I said, that kind of joke is-”

“Sakuraaa, you doin’ okay……. Wait, again?”

On reflex, I turned around to that lively voice. Best-Friend-san had entered the ward energetically, but her face twisted when she saw me. Recently, I’ve gotten the feeling that Best-Friend-san’s antagonistic attitude towards me was becoming increasingly obvious. At this rate, it didn’t seem like her wish for me to get along with Best-Friend-san after her death would become a reality.

I stood up from the chair, said my goodbyes, and proceeded to head home. Since Best-Friend-san was clearly glaring at me, I avoided letting our eyes meet. The animal programme last night had said it wasn’t good to look predators in the eye.

However, contrary to my wishful thinking for us to continue engaging in uninterrupted mutual avoidance, the girl on the bed suddenly remembered something outrageous, and blurted it out unfiltered.

“By the way, Get-Along-kun, what about Big Bro’s jersey and underwear that you borrowed?”

“Ah……”

I had never been so thoughtlessly cursed to this extent before. Today, though I had put her older brother's clothes that I was lent into my bag, and had meant to return them, I had forgotten to do so.

However, there was nothing for me to say now.

I turned around, and saw the girl grinning, as a shocked expression surfaced on the face of Best-Friend-san, who had moved to the side of the bed. Trying my best to conceal my trembling, I retrieved a plastic carrier containing the set of clothes from my bag, and passed it to her.

"Tha~nks."

Still grinning, she looked at both Best-Friend-san and me. I too, gave Best-Friend-san a quick glance. Perhaps I had a foolish desire to see something scary. Having recovered from the shock, Best-Friend-san was now glaring at me with eyes that could kill. Somehow, it felt as if she was roaring like a lion.

I immediately diverted my eyes away from Best-Friend-san, and quickly shuffled out of the room, hearing Best-Friend-san draw close to the girl and ask in an exceedingly low voice, "What do you mean by underwear?" So that I wouldn't get dragged into something troublesome, I worked my feet faster and faster, further away from the room.

On Monday, the start of the following week, I headed to school and found that an extremely outrageous rumour about me had swept through the classroom.

Somehow, it seemed like it was a rumour about how I was stalking the girl. The one I heard about it from was the boy who would offer gum to me like it was an established custom. While I frowned at the nonsensical rumour, as expected, he offered me some gum while seemingly enjoying himself, to which I politely declined.

I tried to somehow deduce the origins of the rumours. Surely, somewhere along the way, there had probably been some number of sightings of the girl and I together, which had been then exaggerated into gossip that I was always around her. Having heard that, people who didn't think well of me labelled me as a stalker in an act of ill-will, thus creating a rumour that was treated as if it were true - this was as far as my deduction got, but it may have still been nowhere near the truth.

Even if it didn't come about in such a manner, I was still dismayed at how removed from reality the rumour was. As though some huge incident had

occurred, almost every person in class was looking in my direction, whispering things like “there’s the stalker, better be careful”, having completely bought into the hearsay.

To say it once more - from the bottom of my heart, I was appalled. Just how could they accept so easily the views of the majority? Surely, if the thirty of them gathered together, they could probably kill a person without any hesitation. As long as one believed in their own righteousness, they could probably bring themselves to do anything. And all the while, they wouldn’t even realise that such a system was more machine than human.

That was why I thought that if the matter were to escalate, there would be an outbreak of bullying directed at me, but that was just me being overly self-conscious. To put it clearly, the one they were interested in was the girl, not me who was following after her.

No, I wasn’t even following after her. That was why, there was no benefit for them to take any action against me, and there was no need for me to do anything troublesome. But as for how Best-Friend-san would glare at me with interest - or perhaps just hostility – every day when I attended school, that was simply scary.

When I told her about the matter on my second visit on Tuesday, she burst out laughing, holding her pancreas.

“Kyouko, everyone, and Get-Along-kun are all interesting huh!”

“You’re the type that thinks talking behind people’s backs is amusing? What a horrible human.”

“What’s amusing is how everyone is getting involved with you - who they’ve never gotten involved with before - in a way that doesn’t make sense. And so, do you know how you got yourself into this sort of situation?”

“Isn’t it because I’ve been hanging out with you?”

“So you’re making it my fault? That’s not it though, it’s because you haven’t properly talked with everyone.”

She asserted while peeling mandarins on the bed.

“You see, they all don’t know Get-Along-kun’s character, so that’s why they’ve come to think like that. But clearing the mutual misunderstanding aside, I think you should try and get along with everyone.”

“I’m not going to do something that won’t benefit anyone though.”

It was something unnecessary for me, who would be alone once she was gone, and our classmates, who would forget about me without her around.

“I’m sure that once everyone knows more about you, they’ll properly understand that you’re an interesting person. Besides, I don’t think they really think badly of Get-Along-kun.”

While talking about foolish things and peeling mandarins, I thought of something.

“Apart from you and Kyouko-san, they don’t think of me as being anything but a ‘Plain-Classmate’.”

“Did you get that from asking the people themselves?”

She tilted her head to the side, as if she were striking at the core of my character.

“I didn’t ask. But I think that’s how it is…..”

“But you wouldn’t know that without asking the people themselves. Isn’t that just Get-Along-kun’s assumption? And that isn’t necessarily right.”

“It doesn’t matter if it is or isn’t right, after all, I’m not going to involve myself with anybody, and it’s nothing but my imagination, it’s just how I think it is. It’s an interest of mine to imagine what someone thinks of me when they call my name.”

“What’s with that self-absorption? Are you the self-absorbed sort of boy?

“Nope, I’m the prince of self-absorption that hails from the land of self-absorption. Show your respect.”

With an unamused face, she devoured the mandarins. I never thought of getting her to understand my system of values. She was the opposite sort of human from me after all.

She was a human that lived through getting involved with people. Her expressions and character had stories behind them. In contrast to that, all my human relationships outside of my family existed only within my head. It didn’t matter if I were liked or disliked as long no harm came to me - I’d been living with such thoughts. From the very beginning, I’d already given up on getting involved with people. As the opposite of her, I had no need for

the humans around me. Though if asked whether that was fine, I'd just be troubled.

Having finished eating the mandarins, she carefully folded the peels together and tossed them at the trash can. The ball of skin sailed splendidly into the can, and just with that trivial event, she happily punched her fist into the air.

"By the way, what do you think I think of you?"

"Who knows, isn't it something along the lines of 'we get along'?"

At my appropriate response, she pouted.

"Bzzz, wrooong answer. Though I did think that before."

I tilted my head to the side at the peculiar girl's phrasing. She had thought that - in other words, it probably meant that her way of thinking hadn't changed to that of others', but she noticed that her own way of thinking was off the mark. Just a little, it interested me.

"Then, what do you think of me now?"

"If things like this were revealed, then human relations wouldn't be interesting anymore. It's because humans have no idea what they are to others that friendship and love are interesting y'know."

"Like I thought, that's how you think huh."

"Huh? Have we talked about this before?"

Probably having really forgotten, she brought her eyebrows together, looking mystified. That expression was strange, and so I ended up laughing. I looked at myself, who had always been like an outsider, smiling honestly at someone. I was doubtful that I had become this sort of person without realising, but on the flip side, I felt that it was so. The one that made me like this was, without a doubt, the girl before my eyes. Though no one could know whether that was a good or bad thing. But regardless, I had changed quite a bit.

Looking at me smiling, she narrowed her eyes.

"I want to show everyone that ?????-kun is a really good person."

Her voice was gentle. So she had the gall to say that sort of thing to the boy that had pushed her down. Though this probably meant that I'd regret doing that for the rest of my life.

"Everyone aside, you should go and tell Kyouko-san. She scares me."

"I'm just saying but - that girl, she cares about her best friend, so that's why she thinks you're deceiving me."

"Then I guess there's a problem with your ability to communicate information huh. Even though Kyouko-san seems like she has a good head on her shoulders."

"Hm, what, you're showering Kyouko with praise. Are you thinking of fooling around with Kyouko after I die? Even I'm shocked."

I devoured a mandarin segment as I looked back at her overreaction with an unamused face. She reseated herself on the bed seemingly disinterested, making me smile again.

"Well then, so for today's magic trick…"

What she had picked up this time was how to make it look like the coin in her palm could disappear and reappear at her will. I got caught up in the programme, and similar to the previous trick, I thought it was excellent for a beginner. To me, who didn't know anything, it just about made me think that she perhaps had an exceptional talent for this.

"Well I've been practicing the entire time after all! Since I don't have time y'know."

Wasn't it because she had time that she was able to practice? I was about to politely insert such a jab, but I let it go to let her know that I wasn't generous with jokes.

"If it's like this, you really might become amazing after a year huh."

"Hm, well, I guess!"

She had made a weird pause. Perhaps it was because she minded having her joke ignored. Since it couldn't be helped, I honestly praised her hard work and its outcome. Spirits lifted, she smiled.

With that, my second hospital visit to her ended without any problems.

The problem arose for me alone on the way home from the hospital.

For me, the place that I would say I liked most in this world were bookshops, and so, on this day too, I had dropped by a bookshop on the way home from the hospital. Inside the store with an overworked air-conditioner, I browsed through its books. Fortunately, I hadn't brought along the girl whom I would end up making wait, so there was no problem no matter how much time I wanted to spend here.

I didn't have anything that I could be proud of, but I was confident in just my ability to concentrate while reading books. For example, if I wasn't offered gum, or if the sound of the chime embedded within my body doesn't ring, I could probably continue blocking out everything around me forever, reading a book in my own little world. Were I a wild herbivore, I'd surely daydream about other worlds without noticing any predators nearby, and end up getting eaten right away.

That was why, once I finished reading a short story within a paperback in one go, and returned to this world that would deprive a girl of her life through an illness, I realised it at long last.

There was a lion standing beside me.

I jumped up in shock, taken aback. With a large bag hanging from her shoulder, she was looking at the open book in her hands. But I could tell that she was clearly out to get me.

Perhaps, I could keep my footsteps silent, leave this place, and escape. But those fleeting hopes of mine were dashed right away.

"What do you think of Sakura?"

Behind that one line Best-Friend-san gave without any greeting or preamble, there was a force that seemed like it would chew me up if didn't answer correctly.

I felt cold sweat drip down my back - I was stuck. Just what could the right answer be? But, when I thought about it, I realised something. With regard to that question from Best-Friend-san, everything but my feelings towards that girl was clear. I didn't choose any path other than answering frankly with that truth.

"I don't know."

In the several seconds of silence that followed, I couldn't be sure whether Best-Friend-san was at a loss, or hardening her resolve to kill, but by the time I realised it, my arm had been caught in the claws of the lion. Forcefully pulling me close to the point that I staggered, she spoke in an intimidating tone of voice.

"Even though that girl's the way she is, she gets hurt more easily than others. So stop getting close to that girl with half-baked feelings. Because if she gets hurt 'cause of that, I'll kill you."

I'll kill you - it was different from the inconsequential threats elementary schoolers and middle schoolers made against their enemies, it was meant as a serious proclamation of her intentions to me. I shuddered.

Without saying anything more than that, Best-Friend-san left, leaving me desperately trying to somehow calm the beating of my heart that was rampaging throughout the bookstore. In the end, I was unable to leave that spot until I was offered gum by that classmate who just happened to enter the bookstore.

Just what did I think of that girl? That night, I tried seriously thinking about it.

But, as expected, I couldn't even figure out anything close to an answer.

The day after I was almost preyed on, I suddenly received a message from the girl inviting me over. The last two times, I had been contacted a day before each visit, so this was something unusual. I thought that something had happened, but that wasn't the case at all. As soon as I arrived, she began speaking with a resolute smile.

"Won't you help me escape from the hospital?"

The girl had just wanted to unveil the mischief she'd thought of to me right away.

"I don't want to, I still don't want to turn into a murderer."

"It's fine, everyone will forgive you for breaking out a dying lover from the hospital who ends up dying midway, since it was an agreement."

“According to your logic, wouldn’t it be forgivable even if I poured boiling water onto someone if they said to do so?”

“Huh, wouldn’t it?”

“It wouldn’t. It’s just normal physical assault. That’s why something like breaking you out of the hospital - do it with a lover that doesn’t mind shortening your lifespan.”

“Tsk,” looking like she was seriously quite disappointed, she twirled a rubber hairband on her finger. I was surprised. Could it be that she was actually thinking of having me take actions that would put her sickly self in danger? And then I got a shock. Even as a joke, she was actually suggesting foolish actions that would put what little remained of her own life in danger.

Or perhaps, it wasn’t a joke. I looked at her smiling face that was the same as always, and I got a sense of unease which felt like it would melt away and disappear at any moment.

After which, at her suggestion “well then, let’s get out of the ward”, we headed for the store on the third floor together. So that the tube protruding from her right hand would not be ripped out, she walked in front of me, carefully carrying the pouch of medicine with something that looked like a mic stand. Seeing her like this, she brought to mind the image of a sick person. That was what I thought.

On the sofa close to the store, while eating ice cream beside me, she began speaking. I didn’t understand why she suddenly brought up a topic like that.

“Hey, do you know why sakura bloom in spring?”

“You mean, yourself? In that case I don’t understand what you mean.”

“That’s not it, have I even once referred to myself by my own name? C-could it be, you, with another woman called Sakura…… So you were the unfaithful sort of man huh, wouldn’t it be better if you just died?’

“Stop trying to drag me along just because it seems like you’ll have nothing to do in heaven. That’s right, by all means, you should just have your funeral held on Tomobiki, Friend-Pulling Day.”

“No way, I want my friends to live, so that’s no good.”

“Then could you write down on some foolscap the reason you think it’s fine if I died, and submit it to me? So, about the reason sakura bloom in spring. Isn’t it just because it’s that sort of flower?”

I said the most sensible thing, and she laughed through her nose like she was genuinely dumb. I barely controlled myself from thrusting the lemon-flavoured ice candy I had in hand at her nose.

Seemingly having read my bad mood, she laughed frivolously, and explained the part she was trying to get at.

“I’ll tell you. After the sakura have scattered, the next generation of flower buds actually sprout in about three months. But they continue to slumber. They wait for it to become warm, and then they all bloom at once. In other words, sakura wait for the right time to bloom. Isn’t that wonderful?”

I heard what she had to say, and I thought that she was perhaps projecting a little too much intention onto the characteristics of a flower. It just waits for the pollen-carrying insects or birds - maybe both. However, I didn’t make that retort. As for why, it was because I had arrived at another opinion from a different perspective.

“I see, it’s really a perfect fit for your name.”

“Because they’re pretty? Aww, you’re making me blush”

“……It’s not like that, I just thought that the name of the flower that choses to bloom in spring was a perfect name for you, who thinks that meetings and happenings aren’t coincidences, but choices.”

After momentarily drawing a blank at my opinion, a smile broke on her face, and she said, “Thanks!” Perfect in this case was the same as suitable - it wasn’t meant as a compliment, so I couldn’t understand why she looked that happy.

“?????-kun’s name suits you pretty well too you know.”

“……I wonder.”

“After all, you’re: Someone who’s. Helping. Ill-fated me. Get. Along.”

She made that joke, proudly laughing while pointing back and forth between herself and I.

When I heard those words, I sped through all of our conversations up till now, and once again thought that something about her today really was weird.

She was nibbling at a watermelon popsicle, and just like always, it appeared as if she would continue to live forever. That hadn't changed, and yet somewhere in her joke I could hear it - yes, it was as if it were the last day of summer vacation and she was frantically searching for something she hadn't already done.

What happened?

That was what I wondered at the bottom of my heart. However, I didn't ask her about it because I thought the fleeting impatience I saw inside of her was only natural. She had only a year left to live. To begin with, it should have been stranger for her to have been so easy-going about it.

That was why on that day, I decided to treat the sense of unease I got from her as an extremely trivial matter that was born merely from my own subjectivity.

I thought that it was the right thing to do.

In spite of that, when I was next called down to the hospital ward on Saturday morning, the slight sense of unease I had felt showed its form right before my eyes.

When I entered the room at the designated time, she noticed my presence right away, and smiled as she called my name. But that smile was a little awkward.

It were as if she had meticulously drawn that vivid expression on her heart, and that let slip her anxiety. Subconsciously, I could feel that something was off.

I coaxed my cowardly feet forward, and sat down on the same pipe chair as usual. With a determined expression, she said something that didn't differ from what I had come to expect.

"Hey…… ?????-kun."

"……Yeah, what's the matter?"

"Just one time is fine so-"

While she said that, she grabbed the poker cards that had been left on the rack.

“Truth or Dare - won’t you play it with me?”

“…….What for?”

A suggestion to play the devil’s game. Even though it looked like I could have immediately refused, I wanted to know why she would suddenly bring up something like that, and more than anything else, I was curious about her washed-out appearance.

Since she couldn’t answer right away, I continued speaking.

“So this means you have something you want to ask me no matter what, or something you want me to do no matter what huh. Or maybe, something that I’d decline if you asked norma-”

“It’s…… Not like that. You would probably tell me normally, but I’m unable to get myself together to ask, so I’m thinking of just leaving it up to luck.”

Just what in the world was she being so awfully ceremonious about that she was unable to articulate it? I wasn’t aware of keeping any secrets that would trouble her.

The girl gazed into my eyes. It was as if she was trying to get her strong will to push through. Mysteriously, her eyes erased any intention I had of defying her. It was because I was a reed boat. Or perhaps, it was because it was her who I was facing.

After some thought, I ended up making this sort of decision:

“……You did lend me a book after all. If it’s just one time, I’ll play along.”

“Thanks.”

She said just one word of gratitude, looking like she knew my answer beforehand, and began to shuffle the cards. As I thought, she was acting strange. She usually had a habit of saying unnecessary things like it was her livelihood, but today, she was speaking without adding any superfluous words. Wondering just what in the world had happened to her, curiosity and concern turned into yoghurt inside my heart.

The rules for Truth or Dare were the same as before. Since we were only playing one round, we took turns shuffling the cards five times each, then placed the stack on the bed for us to draw a card from wherever we liked.

After she went through a lot of trouble to pick one from a little beneath the middle, I took the first card from the top. Since their faces were obscured, we didn't know where each card had ended up, so there wasn't anything like a difference in the values between the cards we choose. Furthermore, I wasn't as invested in this game as she was. She'd probably get angry if I said something like this, but this time, I'd have been fine with either winning or losing. If the match were to be decided based on the gap in fighting spirit and willpower, if the gods had created such a setting in this world, it was without a doubt her victory.

She'd probably say it – that it was interesting because it wasn't like that.

We flipped over the cards at the same time, and she made a face that seemed to show heartfelt frustration.

"Waaah, this is, a complete defeat."

She gripped onto the bedcover, like she was waiting for her disappointment to run off. I, who ended up winning, could do nothing but look on. Before long, she noticed my gaze and threw her disappointment away somewhere, breaking out into a smile.

"Can't be helped huh! It's just the way it is! That's why it's interesting!"

"……I see, so it's no good if I don't think of a question huh."

"It's fine, I'll answer whatever you want y'know? Do you want to hear about my first kiss, maybe?"

"I'm not going to spend this valuable right on that sort of question with a worth lower than an elevator."

"……Elevators have their own worth though?"

"And so? What of it? Did you actually think I said something meaningful?"

With high spirits, she burst into laughter. Looking at her laughing, it made me think that perhaps it was just me overthinking she was different from normal. This time too, and the last time I came to the hospital as well - maybe there was no significant basis for the difference in her appearance. Any little thing could have caused her expression to change, like alcohol or

the weather - those kinds of insignificant reasons. Yes, that was what I hoped.

I, who gained a right in the midst of my reluctance, wondered. What should I ask the girl? The interest I had in the girl hadn't changed from when we last played this game. How in the world did a human like her come to be? Actually, there may have been one or two things that I was more curious about. For example, what she thought of me.

However, I didn't have the courage to ask her those one or two things. A human like me came to be from cowardice - being with her made me realise that. I was like the reverse of the courageous girl.

I looked at her as I pondered over what to ask her. She was staring in my direction, in anticipation of a question. The girl that was seated quietly on the bed, just a little more than before, looked like she was dying.

Wanting to shake of that feeling, I decided on my question which simultaneously left my mouth.

"To you, what does it mean to live?"

"Waaah, you're actually being serious about this." After poking fun at me, she made a contemplative face and stared at the sky, thinking. "To live, huh," she muttered.

With just that, I could tell that she was staring not at death but at life, and with just that - though it was by a miniscule amount - I felt my heart becoming lighter. I was a coward. I already knew, but somewhere inside me, I still couldn't accept that she was going to die.

I recalled how distraught I'd become looking inside her bag in the hotel during the trip, and how she'd cornered me with her final question that day.

"Yeah! That's it! I got it!"

She pointed upwards with her index finger, indicating that she had reached a conclusion. So that I wouldn't miss any of her words, I perked up my ears.

"What it means to live, you see-"

"....."

"Is surely the connecting of our hearts with someone else's. Working towards that is what we call living."

……Aah, I understand now.

Having realised it, I got goosebumps.

That which was referred to as her existence, through her gaze and voice, the heat of her will, and the trembling of her life - I realised that it made my soul quake.

“Acknowledging someone, getting to like someone, getting to hate someone, enjoying being together with someone, detesting being together with someone, holding hands with someone, hugging someone, and growing apart from someone. That, is living. If we were all alone, we wouldn’t know that we exist. I, who hates someone despite liking someone else, who enjoys being together with someone despite detesting being together with someone else - I think it’s because of those kinds of relationships that I have with people that I - not someone else - am living. I have a heart because everyone exists, and I have a body so that I can be touched by everyone. Right now, I, who was formed in such a manner, am living. Right here, I am still living. That’s why there’s meaning in people being born. Through our own choices, right now, right here, you, and me as well, are living.”

“……”

“……Well, I did end up getting pretty heated, but was this actually an episode of Serious Teenage Forum?”

“Nope, this is a hospital ward.”

I answered exceedingly curtly. She puffed out her cheeks.

I hoped that she would let it go, since I didn’t mean for it to come out like that.

“……”

“?????-kun……?”

This time, while listening to her words, for the first time, I was able to discover my true feelings that had accumulated at the deepest depths of my core. It was right beneath my nose by the time I realised, but despite having become a part of my heart itself, it was something that I hadn’t noticed till now. It was because I was a coward.

The answer that I had been seeking these past few days - no, actually forever - was now right there.

That’s right, I……you.

I had been suppressing those words, so it took my all.

“…….Really.”

“Ah, you’ve finally started talking again, what’s up? ?????-kun.”

“You’ve, really been teaching me a lot of things.”

“Wah, what’s this all of a sudden, it’s embarrassing.”

“It’s how I really feel. Thank you.”

“Are you running a fever?”

She placed her palm on my forehead. But naturally, since the temperature was normal, she tilted her head to the side. Or rather, did she really, seriously think that I was running a fever? Finding that amusing, I ended up laughing. Seeing such a sight, she once again pushed her palm towards me. I laughed again. And the cycle repeated itself.

Aaah, I was having fun. It’s because she was here.

Once she finally understood that I wasn’t running a fever, I gratefully suggested having the diced pineapples that I had bought for her.

Having said during the last hospital visit that pineapple would be good for my next visit, her face seemed to blossom with happiness.

While the two of us were enjoying the pineapples, she let out a sigh.

“A~ah, I don’t have any luck either huh.”

“For Truth or Dare? That’s true, but even if we weren’t playing the game, if it’s a question that I can answer, I’ll answer it for you.”

“It’s fine, since that’s just the outcome of the game.”

She had flatly refused. As before, I still hadn’t the slightest clue what she had wanted to ask.

Once we were done eating the snacks, I taught her the new material that had been discussed during the supplementary lessons, and then the customary magic trick presentation began. Since not much time had passed since the last visit, this time she did something simple using the magic props. As usual, I, who didn't have a profound knowledge of magic, was honestly impressed. Even during our studying time and our magic trick time as well, I - who didn't realised my own heart until just a little while ago - was looking only at her.

"Well then, it's about time for me to go home. My stomach's getting empty too after all."

"Huh! You're going home already?"

She thrashed about in protest like a child. Perhaps she dreaded the boredom of being alone in a hospital ward much more than I had thought.

"Isn't it about time for you to have lunch? Besides, I don't want to get devoured by Kyouko-san for lunch."

"Pancreas too?"

"Maybe so, huh."

I stood up while imagining myself getting preyed on by a carnivorous animal, and she cried out, "Hold on!"

"Hold on for a little longer - well then, I still have one last request."

She beckoned me closer with a gesture of her hand. I approached her without the least bit of caution, and looking like she hadn't any ill will or reservation or ulterior motive or hidden agenda or second thoughts or responsibility, she stretched out her upper body and embraced me.

I forgot the shock I had in response to her absolutely unexpected actions. Calm to the point that even I was surprised, I rested my chin on her shoulder. Sickly sweet.

"……Hey."

"This is different from the other day y'know, this isn't mischief."

"…….Then, what?"

"Recently I've just strangely begun liking people's body heat!"

I had a conviction of sorts about the manner in which she was speaking.

“Hey, the truth is it’s always been on my mind but-”

“My three sizes? Since my chest is pressing against you.”

“Are you sure you aren’t dumb?”

“Hahaha.”

“It’s about how you’ve been acting a little strange. Did something happen?”

Still in an embrace, no, to be accurate, still being wilfully embraced by her, I waited quietly for her answer. Unlike before, I didn’t think I was being made a fool of, rather, I thought that if she was fine with something like my body heat, she should just use it if she wanted to.

She slowly shook her head from side to side twice.

“……Nope, no~thing at all!”

Naturally, I didn’t believe that. But, I didn’t have the courage to get her to say what she didn’t want to say.

“It’s just that, I wanted to taste the truth and everyday life that you’ve been giving me.”

“…….I see.”

Well, even if I did have outrageous courage, and even if I didn’t, by this time, I was unable to do anything about not understanding the inside of her heart.

I really was forsaken by that thing known as timing.

While she was still silent, I heard the roar of a beast from behind me.

“Sakuraaa, good mor…… What, you….. Unforgivable!”

I pushed her away onto the bed, and while hearing her “kyaa”, I looked over my shoulder to find a classmate glaring at me with the face of the Devil. Even I couldn’t bring myself to look away. Best-Friend-san was slowly making her way towards me, and thinking of escaping, I moved backwards, but the bed blocked the way.

When Best-Friend-san was finally about to grab a hold of my collar, I received help from the one that probably should have been resting no matter what the circumstance. The girl quickly got off the bed and tightly hugged Best-Friend-san.

“I’ll calm Kyouko down, so-!”

“Ah, then, bye!”

Having been made to - or rather - in order to escape from Best-Friend-san, I left the ward. I was always running away whenever she arrived. Finally, as I masterfully ignored Best-Friend-san loudly screaming my name, my third visit came to an end. It felt like her sickly sweet scent still lingered on my body.

Just like I had expected - or perhaps I shouldn’t say it in such a manner, since I hadn’t actually gotten a clear idea about what had happened, but - the next day, on Sunday night, I received a message from the girl, and I learnt the truth behind the matter which she seemed to have been hiding that day.

The duration of her hospitalisation had been extended two weeks longer than planned.

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She had informed me of her extended hospitalisation with unexpected indifference. Though I was worried, it seemed like the patient herself had anticipated as much, so I was a little relieved. I'd only admit it inside my heart, but I had been rather beside myself with worry.

On Tuesday afternoon after the supplementary lessons, I went to pay her a visit. The supplementary lessons were about to come to an end too.

"There's only a little more than half of summer vacation left to go huh!"

She said only that with a tone that could have been considered lamenting. As though she were trying to convey to me that that alone was regrettable.

Outside, the sun was shining. The air-conditioned hospital ward was like a shelter that protected us from the sun's rays, but it made me uneasy for some reason.

"Was Kyouko alright?"

"Aah, yeah. I get the feeling that her glare has somehow become more piercing than last week, but maybe your persuasion worked like a tranquilliser, so she hasn't lunged at me yet."

"Stop talking about my best friend like she's some beast."

"You must have yet to be glared at by her with those eyes. So she's pretending to be a cat, huh. A feline beast then - maybe a lion."

I hadn't talked to her about last week's incident at the bookstore.

I poured the canned peaches I had bought as a gift into a dish, and dug in with her. Somehow or other, the sweetness of the syrup brought back memories from when I was an elementary schooler.

While gnawing on the abnormally yellow peaches, she gazed outside.

"Why did you come to the hospital on a day with such good weather like this? You should play dodgeball or something outside."

“First of all, you called me here. Secondly, I haven’t played something like dodgeball since elementary school. And thirdly, I don’t have anyone to play it with. While considering the three aforementioned points, please choose which you’d rather I do.”

“Both.”

“Greedy huh - then, I’ll let you have the last peach.”

With a childlike smile, she stabbed her fork into the peach and stuffed the whole thing into her mouth. I carried the plate and the can to the sink at the corner of the ward. It seemed like there was a system where the nurses would clear it up if I left it here. They would even bring out food too - if not for the illness within her, this could have actually been a VIP room.

As part of the VIP room package came my tutoring at no additional cost. Today too, despite finding it a bother, she took down notes seriously. I had asked her once before about the necessity of her studying. Since she wouldn’t be taking exams or anything. She’d replied that if her grades went to tatters, it’d make the people around her think that something was strange. I understood, and realised why I had never felt a special need to study no matter the situation.

Today, her magic show was postponed. She said that it wasn’t possible to keep on preparing new productions after all. And that she was preparing the ace up her sleeve, so I should look forward to it, and so-

“I’ll wait with my neck stretched out.”

“How are you going to stretch your neck out? You mean like getting someone to pull on your head?”

“So you’ve gotten so dumb that you can’t even understand a figure of speech? Now you have a virus in your head too huh, how awful.”

“The one that calls someone else dumb is the dumb one!”

“So I was mistaken huh - I said that it was because you have a disease, but it wasn’t a disease.”

“There’s no mistake, just die! Since I’ll be dying too.”

“Could you please not take advantage of the confusion to cast a curse on me?”

It was the same playful conversation as always. Being able to have meaningless conversations like this delighted me. Because it felt like such an atmosphere that allowed for poking fun at each other had become proof of an everyday that wouldn't change.

As expected, I - who was relieved by something so meaningless - was probably lacking in that thing known as human experience.

She began to write something in the 'Disease Co-existence Journal', and so, for some reason or another, I shifted my gaze to a corner of the ward. I wondered if it was because of the attachment and accumulation of the illnesses of the patients from before that it had become discoloured.

"Does ?????-kun have any plans for summer vacation?"

I was in the middle of turning back to face her when my name was called, and so my gaze returned to her sooner than I had expected.

"Probably just coming here, and reading books at home. And homework too."

"That's all? You should go and do something, it's summer vacation after all. How about going on a trip with Kyouko in my stead?"

"I don't have the qualifications required to enter a lion's cage. And weren't you going on a trip with Kyouko-san?"

"It's kinda impossible thoooough. My hospital stay has been extended, and that girl is busy with club activities too."

So she said, smiling a lonely smile.

"I wanted to go on one more trip y'knooow."

.....Huh?

Her sombre words made my breathing stop for a moment.

And in that instant, I saw a black haze creep into the room. I felt the foul something that had been slumbering within my heart's core make its way up my throat. Hurriedly, I took a gulp of tea from its PET bottle, fighting the urge of retching it out. What was that just now?

I mulled over her words inside my head. Just like how a detective in a novel would've done with an important character's lines.

It was probably because I was making a troubled face. She withdrew her wry smile, and tilted her head to the side.

The one that was puzzled was me.

So why was she doing that?

The moment I realised it, it flew right out my mouth.

“Why, did you say that like you’ll never be able to go on a trip again?”

She looked like she had been caught off guard. She made a face like a pigeon that had been shot with a peashooter.

“……I said it, like that?”

“You did.”

“I see - guess even I have thoughts that appear like that hu~h.”

“Hey……”

I wondered just what sort of face I was making. The unrest that had buried itself deep within the depths of my heart since my last visit swelled, and at last threatened to burst forth from my mouth. Desperate, I tried to cover my mouth with my hands - but my mouth moved before my hands could.

“You’re not going to die, right?”

“Huh? I’m going to die though. We’re all going to die, me and you included.”

“I don’t mean that!”

“If you’re talking about what happens once my pancreas breaks down, well of course I’ll die.”

“I don’t mean that!”

Slamming my open palms onto the corner of the bed, I jumped onto my feet without thinking. The chair I’d been sitting on toppled over, filling the ward with an unpleasant metallic clang. My eyes were locked onto her own, unflinching. This time, she made a face that was undoubtedly one of shock. Even I was shocked at myself. Just what did I just do that for?

I strained my parched throat for the last vestiges of my voice I could muster.

“You’re still, not going to die, right?”

Since she was still in shock, the girl didn’t respond, and silence fell upon the ward. Fearing the silence, I continued to speak.

“You’ve been acting weird for a while now.”

“……”

“You’re hiding something aren’t you? It’s obvious you know. Playing Truth or Dare, and suddenly holding onto me too. And when I asked if something had happened, your reaction was weird. You made such a weird pause - did you think I wouldn’t think it was strange? Even though it’s become like this, I’m just concerned about you because you’re suffering from a major illness.”

I had rattled on and on, speaking so fast I couldn’t recall what I’d said. I was out of breath by the time I was done. But there was another reason as to why I hadn’t drawn breath. I was perplexed. About her, who was hiding something, and myself, who had decided to involve myself in her affairs, too.

Staring at the girl who still had the look of utter shock on her, I - who operated on the principle of calming down when someone else was more upset - composed myself a little, and re-seated myself on the chair. My hands slowly loosened their grip on the bedsheets.

I looked at her face. Her eyes were wide open and her lips were sealed shut. Perhaps she would run away and try to sweep everything under the rug again. I wondered what I would do if it came to that. I wondered if I would have the courage to pursue her further. And I wondered if there would be any meaning to it if I did.

Just what……did I want to do?

An answer derailed my train of thought.

Normally, she would quickly cycle between a variety of expressions. That was why I expected nothing else but her dumbfoundedness to soon give way to another vivid expression. But I was wrong.

This time, the colour of her face changed really slowly. The corners of her sealed lips curled upwards with all the haste of a snail. Her wide-open eyes

slowly narrowed, like curtains drawn to mark the end of a play. Her cheeks - frozen in shock - began to melt, stretching themselves out.

She made a smile that I could never imitate even if I spent the rest of my life trying.

“Shall I tell you? About what happened.”

“……Please.”

I was as nervous as a child about to be disciplined.

She opened her large mouth, and with a look of bliss on her face, responded.

“It’s no~thing at all. It’s just that I’ve been thinking about you.”

“About me?”

“Yup, about you. You see, we really played Truth or Dare because I was thinking of asking something trivial. If I had to say it, I was thinking about how great it would be if I could get along better with you.”

“……Really?”

I asked with a voice tinged with scepticism.

“Really. I wouldn’t lie to you after all.”

It may have been lip service, but even so, I couldn’t conceal my relief. My shoulders gave way at once, having been sapped of their strength. I knew I was being gullible, but I chose to believe her.

“Ehehehehehehehehehehehehe.”

“……What’s wrong?”

“Naaah, I’m just thinking that I’m really happy right now. I might even die.”

“That’s no good.”

“Do you want me to keep on living?”

“……Yeah.”

“Ehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehe.”

Still looking at my face, she laughed, abnormally happy.

“Wo~w, I’d never have imagined that you’d need me that much. It’s a great blessing as a human y'know, for me to probably be the first person needed by you, a shut-in.

"Just who’s a shut-in here?”

This was all I could manage as a retort; my head felt like it might explode from the embarrassment. My concern for her was something I didn’t want to lose, something that I probably needed. But while that was the truth, the embarrassment involved in voicing my thoughts went far beyond that of simply thinking them. It felt as though all the blood in my body was rushing to my head. It was almost as if I would really die. Somehow, I forced myself to take a deep breath, and let the heat escape my body.

Smile unchanging, she continued with a rhythm that seemed to indicate she hadn’t the slightest intention of giving me pause to recover.

“Since I was acting weird, you thought that I was about to die? Without telling you.”

“……That’s right, your hospitalisation suddenly got extended after all.”

She started laughing loudly, convulsing so violently I thought she might tear off the drip attached to her arm. I couldn’t help but take offense at being the object of such fervent laughter.

“You’re the one at fault for saying easily misunderstood things.”

“But I’ve said it before! That there’s still time! Otherwise, I wouldn’t do something like practice magic y'knooow. But as for what you said earlier, I wonder why you got bothered by a little pause between my words. I think you’ve rea~lly been reading too many novels.”

Once she was done speaking, she started to laugh again.

“Don’t worry, since I’ll properly tell you when it’s time for me to die.”

And then she burst into laughter yet again. Having been laughed at too much, I became a little strange too. It seemed I had somehow made a grave mistake, and was now being confronted about it.

“Make sure to properly eat my pancreas once I die alright.”

“By any chance, could it be that you won’t die if your bad parts were removed? Shall I eat it for you right now then?”

“Do you want me to live?”

“Very much so.”

In my case, I was glad that I was a human whose honest words looked like jokes. Because if my truly, truly honest feelings were to be conveyed, I, who had come to neglect getting involved with humans, would get so embarrassed that I’d never be able to show my face again.

I didn’t know how she received it, but she jokingly said, “Ya~y, I’m so happy,” and spread both her arms out towards me. The face of the girl that seemed to be enjoying herself made it look like she was joking.

“Haven’t you recently begun liking the body heat of others too?”

The words she said between giggles must have been meant as a joke. That was why I decided to respond with my own converse joke - accepting her words honestly.

I stood up, approached her, and jokingly wrapped my hands around her back for the first time. “Wahoo,” she said in a joking manner once again as she wrapped her arms around me. To ask if there was any meaning to it would’ve been unsophisticated. One shouldn’t seek logic in a joke.

We stayed in the same position for a while before it occurred to me that something was strange.

“Hm, guess Kyouko-san isn’t coming at this sort of timing today, huh.”

“That girl has club activities. Actually, what do you think of Kyouko?”

“I guess, a demon that’s trying to interfere with our getting along.”

The two of us laughed, and I took the opportunity to let go of her body, but it was only after she gave my back one more tight squeeze that she let go. We drew apart, and joking till the very end, we laughed till both of our faces turned red.

“Speaking of dying, y'know.”

She broached the topic once the both of us calmed down.

“Bringing something up like that has probably never been done before huh.”

“Recently, I’ve been thinking that I should get started on writing my will.”

“Isn’t it too early? Like I thought, were you lying about how there was still time?”

“It’s not that, you see, I’m going to have to revise and correct it many times, since I want it to look neat. That’s why I’m going to start writing it down.”

“If it’s like that then I guess it’s fine. Since it does take more time to edit than write a novel.”

“See, so I wasn’t wrong after all. So look forward to reading my completed will after I die alright.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

“You mean you want me to die sooner? How horrible. Or so I’d say, but since you need me, you wouldn’t want me to die hu~h.”

She was grinning, but since I was about to reach my limits emotionally, I stopped nodding my head honestly. Even though I frowned at her with unamused eyes, she continued to smile, undaunted. Perhaps it was the symptom of another condition.

“That’s right, since I made you worry needlessly, as an apology I’ll let you be the first one I have fun with when I’m discharged.”

“Seems rather self-important for an apology, huh.”

“You don’t want to?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to.”

“?????-kun really does have that part about you huh.”

I wondered which part she was talking about, but I sort of understood myself, so I didn’t especially ask her about it.

“On the day I get discharged, I’ll be heading home first, but I’ll be free after that, so it’ll be in the afternoon then.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Hmm, what should we do - won’t you be coming over a couple of times before I get discharged? Let’s think it over.”

Just like that, I gave my consent. Afterwards, in the two weeks before her discharge, the plan - which she had decided to call a “promised date” to my dissatisfaction - had turned into a visit to the beach, something she had hoped to do. Additionally, we would drop by a café somewhere, and she would perform for me the magic trick she was still in the midst of practicing.

Truthfully, when I promised to go out with her after she was released, I was worried that something gravely serious would between then and the day of her discharge. But the days up till then passed with nothing of the sort happening. Just this time, I thought perhaps that it was just as she said - I had been reading too many novels.

Within those two weeks, the supplementary lessons had ended, and we welcomed summer vacation. I paid her four visits. On the first, I ran into Best-Friend-san. On the second, we laughed till her bed trembled. On the third, she threw a tantrum when it was time for me to return home. On the fourth, I wrapped both my arms around her back. Not a single event did I get accustomed to.

We made plenty of jokes, shared plenty of laughter, made plenty of digs at each other, and gave each other plenty of respect. It shocked me - otherwise the eternal onlooker - how I had come to love the everyday we spent like elementary schoolers. Just what in the world had happened?

I’ll say it for the me looking back on the present. I was delighted to be getting involved with a person. It was the first time I’d done so since I was born - being together with someone, and not once think that I wanted to be alone.

While surely being the most sentimental in the world about getting involved with a person, my two weeks had been compacted into her ward. They were only four days, but those four days made up the entirety of my two weeks.

Because they were only four days, the day of her discharge arrived right away.

On the day she was to be discharged, I got up early in the morning. I was fundamentally an early riser - I'd wake up early whether it was rain or shine, no matter if I had any plans for the day or not. Incidentally, the skies today were clear, and I did happen to have plans. I opened the window, and could almost see the morning breeze drive out the stagnant air in my room. It was a good morning.

I washed my face downstairs, and headed to the living room just as my father was about to depart. I gave him a few words of appreciation, and with a smile, he gave me a pat on the back before leaving the house. He was energetic all year round. I had always found it strange that that sort of father could have a child like me.

My breakfast had already been set when I arrived at the dining table. Thanking my mother for the food, I took my seat, and said "thanks for the food" once more to the meal on the table before I dug in for some miso soup. I was quite fond of the miso soup my mother made.

While I savoured her cooking, my mother - who had finished washing the kitchenware for now - sat down before me, and began to drink from her cup of hot coffee.

"Hey, you."

As of now, the only ones that called me "you" in such an unceremonious manner were my mother and Best-Friend-san.

"Yeah?"

"So you've got yourself a girlfriend huh."

"……What?"

Just what was this person saying first thing in the morning?

"Then, you've found a girl you like huh. Whichever it is, bring her over next time."

"It's neither, so there's no one to bring over."

"Hmmm, I was so certain."

I was wondering what brought this about, but perhaps it was just her parent's intuition working. Even if it had come to some outrageous conclusions.

“So, it’s just a normal friend huh.”

That wasn’t right either.

“It doesn’t matter whichever it is. I’m happy that someone who looks at you properly has appeared for the first time.”

Huh?

“You, did you really think I couldn’t tell when you were lying? Don’t look down on mothers.”

Feeling grateful, I gazed intently at the face of the woman I could no longer underestimate. My mother, who - as a far cry from me - carried a strong light in her eyes, seemed really happy. Honestly, how humbling. The corners of my lips couldn’t help but curl. My mother continued to watch television whilst drinking her coffee.

Since my plans with the girl were scheduled for the afternoon, I spent the morning reading my books. It still wasn’t yet the turn of ‘The Little Prince’ that I had borrowed from her. I lay on my bed, reading a mystery novel I had bought a little earlier.

Time passed right by, and before noon arrived, I’d changed into a simple outfit and left the house. Since I had wanted to go to a bookstore, I arrived at the station much earlier than scheduled, and visited a large bookstore nearby.

I bought a book after milling around for a while, and began heading to the café where we had agreed to meet. It was just a short walk from the station, and since it was a weekday, the inside of the store was relatively empty. I ordered an iced coffee and sat myself down at a seat beside a window. There was still about an hour till we were supposed to meet.

The store was air-conditioned, but the summer heat still clung to my body. Taking a gulp of the iced coffee, I felt a pleasant sensation – it were as though the coffee was circulating throughout my body. But were that truly the case, I’d already be dead, so it was ultimately just an issue with my imagination.

Having borrowed the powers of the cooler and the coffee to clear my perspiration, my stomach grumbled. As I led a healthy lifestyle, I got hungry precisely when noon arrived. The thought of getting something to eat crossed my mind for a second, but since I had promised to have lunch with

the girl, I held myself back. It would've been a pain to be brought to another all-you-can-eat buffet right after I'd satisfied my appetite here. She did have that part about her after all.

Recalling the two consecutive days that I had unwillingly joined her for lunch, I smiled. So over a month had passed since then, huh.

I decided to quietly wait for the girl. I placed the paperback I had been reading earlier onto the table.

Naturally, I thought of reading it, but unexpectedly, for one reason or another, my gaze turned outside. I didn't understand why. If I had to pick a reason, I could only say that it was something I just happened to do. It was a reason that was unlike me, but reminiscent of the girl's carefree nature.

Under the harsh sunlight, all sorts of people were coming and going. A male in a suit looked particularly hot. I wondered why he wouldn't take off his suit. A young female wearing a tank top was headed towards the station with light steps. She probably had something fun planned. There was a high school aged male-female pair holding hands. They were one of those couples. A mother pushing her child in a stroller was……

I thought about it, and was taken aback.

Those people walking outside the window would surely never have any relation to me in this lifetime - beyond the shadow of a doubt, they were strangers.

I thought about why I was thinking of them, even though they were strangers. Something like this would never have happened before.

I'd always thought that I wasn't interested in the people around me. No, that was wrong. I had decided not to be interested in them. That sort of me-

Without thinking, I ended up laughing to myself. I see, so I had changed this much, huh. It was amusing, and so I ended up laughing.

The face of the girl I was supposed to meet today came to mind.

I had been changed. Without any doubt, I had been changed.

On the day I met her, my nature as a human, my everyday, and my views on life and death all became variable.

Aah, that’s right, if I were to ask her, she’d probably say that with all of the choices I had made up till now, I had chosen to change myself.

I had chosen to pick up the paperback that had been left behind.

I had chosen to open the paperback.

I had chosen to speak with her.

I had chosen to teach her how to do library committee work.

I had chosen to take her up on her invitation. I had chosen to eat with her.

I had chosen to walk beside her. I had chosen to go on a trip with her.

I had chosen to go wherever she wanted. I had chosen to sleep in the same room as her.

I had chosen truth. I had chosen dare.

I had chosen to sleep on the same bed as her.

I had chosen to help her eat the remainder of her breakfast. I had chosen to watch the street performer together with her.

I had chosen to suggest magic to her.

I had chosen to buy an Ultraman for her. I had chosen the souvenir to buy.

I had chosen to answer that the trip was fun.

I had chosen to visit her house.

I had chosen to play shogi. I had chosen to pull ahead of her.

I had chosen to push her down. I had chosen to hurt the boy that was our class representative.

I had chosen to let him hurt me. I had chosen to make up with the girl.

I had chosen to visit the girl. I had chosen the gifts to bring.

I had chosen to tutor the girl. I had chosen when to return home.

I had chosen to escape from Best-Friend-san. I had chosen to watch her magic tricks.

I had chosen to play Truth or Dare. I had chosen the question to ask.

I had chosen not to escape from her arms. I had chosen to press her for answers.

I had chosen to laugh with her. I had chosen to embrace her.

No matter how many times I had to do so, I would have chosen the same.

Having undeniably chosen of my own free will even though I should have made different choices, I was here. Different from the me of the past, I was here.

I see, I understood now.

No one, not even me, was truly a reed boat. To be swept away or not - we were the ones to choose.

The one who taught me that was, without a doubt, her. The girl that was supposed to die soon, but even so, continued to face forward more than anybody else, and went about making her life her own. The girl that loved the world, loved people, and loved herself.

Once again, I had that thought.

I……you.

The cellphone in my pocket vibrated.

“I just got home! I might be just a little late, sorry (sweats). I’m putting on something cute for you after all (lol).”

I saw her message, and after thinking for a little bit, I replied.

“Congratulations on your discharge. I was just thinking about you.”

A response to the message I had jokingly sent came right away.

“Well aren’t you saying something unusually delightful! What’s wrong, are you sick? [winking face]”

After a pause, I replied.

“Unlike you, my body is healthy though.”

“How horrible! You’ve hurt me! As punishment, give me a compliment!”

“Nothing comes to mind though - I wonder if the problem’s with me or you?”

“It’s you, 100%. Come on, get to it.”

I placed my cellphone on the table, folded my arms together, and thought. A compliment for her. Something about her that I could compliment - there really were a mountain’s worth of those. Surely so many that my cellphone’s memory wouldn’t be able to store them all.

Having met her, I’ve really learnt plenty of things. She taught me things that I hadn’t known till now.

Exchanging messages like this was one of those things she’d taught me. Because I had learnt for the first time the fun of having conversations with people, I chose words that seemed like they would elicit interesting replies from her.

To begin with, what was amazing about her was her extensive personal magnetism, which was something that seemed to have no relation to her life expectancy. Surely, she had always been like that. Of course, thoughts were moulded little by little, and words increased in richness bit by bit, but the basis for them probably had nothing to do with whether she would die in a year or not.

She, as she was, was amazing. And I thought that that was truly amazing.

I’ll confess it, that every time I was taught something, I thought that she was amazing. A human that was the polar opposite of me. The things that the cowardly me, who only ever kept to himself, couldn’t do - she was a human that could nonchalantly say and do them.

I took my cellphone into my hands.

You are a really amazing person.

I had always thought so. But I was never able to find the right words.

However, I understood it then.

Then, when she taught me what it meant to live.

My heart had been filled with the girl.

I…….you.

“I really wanted to become you.”

To become a human that acknowledged people, to become a human that was acknowledged by people.

To become a human that loved people, to become a human that was loved by people.

When I put it into words, I could only find them too fitting for my heart - such that they permeated throughout that organ of mine. Naturally, I ended up lifting the corners of my mouth.

Just what should I have done to become you?

Just what should I do to become you?

What should I do?

At last, I realised. If I remembered correctly, there should have been a saying that carried the same meaning.

I thought for a bit, and upon remembering, I decided to present that to her.

“I want to brew the dirt under your nails and drink it.”

I typed it out with the intention of only typing it out, and deleted it right away. I realised that just this wouldn’t be interesting. Even though they would have made her delighted, I got the feeling that even more suitable words existed.

Now, thinking once more, the words surfaced from a nook, no, perhaps the core of my memories.

Finding those words was a delight. So much so that I had even become proud of myself.

There were no words more perfect than these to present her.

The words that embodied my everything - I sent them to her cellphone.

I……

“I want to eat your pancreas.”

I placed my cellphone on the table and waited, looking forward to her reply. Something like looking forward to someone’s response - surely, it was something the me from a few months ago would have found unbelievable. But since he had chosen to become the me of the present, he had no right to complain.

I waited earnestly for her.

Earnestly.

However, her reply never came.

Only time passed, and my hunger only grew.

When the time we’d agreed upon arrived, I instead began looking forward to the response she would make when she appeared.

However, she never arrived either.

For thirty minutes, I continued to wait without much concern.

After an hour - and subsequently two - had passed, as expected, I started to become restless with worry.

When three hours had passed, I tried giving her a call for the first time. She didn’t pick up.

When four hours had passed, the scenery outside had turned to that of evening. I left the store. I knew that something had happened, but I didn’t know what. Though vague worries plagued my heart, I had no means by which to erase them, so I sent her a message. Having exhausted all my options, I decided to return home.

When I reached home, I started to think that - just maybe - her parents had forcefully brought her somewhere else. It was the only way I could soothe the fears that had gripped my heart.

I was restless the entire time. It would’ve been great if time all around the world had come to a stop right then.

I came to that thought while watching television, still worried, and about to fill my stomach with the dinner before me.

At that moment, I learnt for the first time why she hadn’t shown up.

She had told a lie.

I had told a lie too.

She had broken her promise of telling me when it was time for her to die.

I had broken my promise of definitely returning whatever I had borrowed from her.

I would never again be able to meet her.

I saw the news.

My classmate Sakura Yamauchi had been discovered collapsed in an alley in her residential district by a resident in the vicinity.

An ambulance had been called to take her away immediately after being discovered, but despite desperate attempts to resuscitate her, she had breathed her last.

The programme’s newscaster read only the truth, without the least bit of sympathy.

Without thinking, I dropped the as of yet unused chopsticks I had been holding onto the floor.

She had been discovered with a commercially available kitchen knife embedded deep into her chest.

She had become the latest victim in the series of random attacks that had caused a commotion from before.

The criminal - some person I didn’t know from somewhere I didn’t know - had been caught right away.

She had died.

I had been depending on it.

I had still been depending on it at this stage.

I had been depending on the one year’s worth of time she had remaining.

Just maybe, even she had been doing so too.

At the very least, I had been mistaken about the reality that no one’s tomorrow was guaranteed.

I had thought that it was a given that the girl who didn’t have much time left would’ve had a tomorrow.

I didn’t know about myself who still had time, but I had thought that the girl who didn’t have time would’ve been promised a tomorrow.

What foolish logic it was.

I had fully believed that the world would indulge only the life of the girl who had not much time left.

Of course, something like that that wouldn’t happen. It didn’t happen.

The world didn’t discriminate.

It refused mercy to its inhabitants - be they humans with healthy bodies like me, or that terminally ill girl who had a foot in the grave.

We had misunderstood. We were fools.

But, could anyone mock us for misunderstanding?

A drama that had its final episode determined wouldn’t end until its final episode.

A manga that had its cancellation decided wouldn’t end until its cancellation.

A movie that had a preview for its final instalment wouldn’t end until its final instalment.

Everyone should have been living while believing that. They should have been taught as much.

I too had thought that.

I had had believed that a novel wouldn’t end until its last page.

Perhaps she would laugh, saying that I'd read too many novels.

Even if I was laughed at, I didn't mind.

Even though I had wanted to read it till the very end. Even though I had meant to read it.

Her story had come to an end with the remaining pages still blank.

With all the build-up, foreshadowing, and red herrings neglected.

I'd never be able to find out a single thing.

The result of the mischief with the rope she was setting up too.

The contents of the magic trick she called the ace up her sleeve too.

What she really thought of me too.

I'd never be able to find out.

……That was what I had thought.

Because she had died, I had given up on that.

But I only realized later that that wasn't true.

Even after her funeral, even after there was nothing left of her but bone, I hadn't gone to her house.

I had shut myself in my own room, and passed the time reading books.

In the end, I required almost ten days to find the courage and a reason to go to her house.

Just before summer vacation ended, I remembered it.

The several remaining pages of her story - there was perhaps just one way to read them.

The thing that could even be called the beginning of me and her.

The ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ – I had to read it.

8

The rain was falling. Summer vacation was coming to an end, but with what had happened, nobody was likely to be in the mood to finish their homework.

Those were my first thoughts upon waking up. It was already the tenth morning in a world without her.

Incidentally, since I was the type to quickly settle my summer vacation homework, I'd never had to rush through it in a panic right before the end of summer vacation.

I headed down to the first floor to wash my face; my father caught me as he entered the washroom to check his appearance before he left for work. We exchanged some pleasantries, and just as I was about to leave the washroom, my father gave me a pat on the back. I figured that there was probably some meaning to it, but thinking about it would've been troublesome.

I greeted my mother who stood in the kitchen, and seated myself at the dining table. The usual breakfast had been prepared. I held my bowl with both hands, and drank the miso soup. My mother's miso soup was delicious as always. While I was having my meal, my mother approached the dining table, carrying an aromatic cup of hot coffee.

When I glanced at her, she looked at me.

"You, you're going out today huh."

"Yeah, after noon."

"Here, take this."

She had casually held out a white envelope to me. I received it and looked inside. A single ten thousand yen note had been slipped inside. Shocked, I looked at my mother.

"This……"

“Go and properly bid your goodbyes.”

Having said only that, she turned to face the television, and laughed at an entertainer’s worthless line. After finishing my breakfast in silence, I returned to my room carrying the white envelope. My mother didn’t say a single thing.

I passed the time in my room until noon arrived, whereupon I got dressed in my school uniform. It just so happened that I’d heard it was better to go in uniform than casual clothes, and not to mention, there was also the reason of wanting to avoid arousing suspicion in her family.

I fixed my bed hair in the washroom on the first floor. My mother had already left for work.

I returned to my room to pack my bag with the things I had to bring - the money I received from my mother, my cellphone, and ‘The Little Prince’. I was still unable to return the sum of money I had borrowed.

I left through the front door of my house. The downpour had now begun in earnest - raindrops ricocheted off the ground, leaving my trousers dotted with a number of wet blotches. Since it wouldn’t have done not to put up an umbrella, I decided to forgo cycling, and began instead to walk towards the girl’s house.

It was midday, and large droplets of rain were falling, so there were few pedestrians on the public roads. I quietly walked the path to school.

Dropping by a convenience store close to school, I bought a proper envelope for the condolence money. Luckily, the store had a table for customers who intended to eat there, so I took the opportunity to sit down and transfer the money into the envelope.

I entered a residential area after walking for a while past school.

Aah, I understood.

In a corner of the residential area. I thought of it, even though it was impudent.

She had been killed somewhere around here. There were pretty much no pedestrians in the area today. It was probably the same that day too. She had been stabbed. Not by someone she had incurred the hatred of, or someone who sympathised with her fate, but someone from somewhere whose face she didn’t even know.

Oddly, I didn’t feel a tinge of guilt. If I hadn’t made plans with her that day, she probably wouldn’t have died - there wasn’t any meaning to regrets like that, and I already understood that it wasn’t that sort of problem.

Some would probably think that the cool-headed me was heartless. Anyone?

I was sad.

But though I was sad, that wouldn’t break me or anything. Losing her, of course saddened me. But there must have been many that were sadder than I was. Her family that I was about to meet was one, Best-Friend-san was one, and the boy who was our class representative was probably one too. When I thought about it like that, no matter what, I was unable to honestly accept my sadness.

Besides, even if I became distraught, it wouldn’t bring her back. The natural conclusion was to tightly keep my spirits together.

Under the rain, I walked. And passed by the place where I had been hit.

I wasn’t very nervous about going to her house. I wasn’t thinking about anything beyond what to do if no one was home.

Arriving before her house for the second time, I pressed the interphone without any hesitation, and after a short time passed, there was a response. I was relieved.

“……Who would this be?”

It was the muffled voice of a female.

I gave my name, and said that I was Sakura-san’s classmate. After going “aah……”, she fell silent for a little bit before finally saying, “Please wait just one moment,” and the interphone cut off.

I waited in the rain, until the front door was opened by a slim woman. Somehow, it appeared that she was the girl’s mum. Notwithstanding her poor complexion, she looked quite similar to the girl. After we exchanged greetings, she made a very constrained smile, and invited me inside. I furled my umbrella, and having been prompted to, entered the house.

I closed the front door behind me, and bowed my head.

“I’m sorry for coming uninvited all of a sudden. I had to attend to a separate matter, and was unable to show my face at the wake and funeral, so at the very least, I’d like to offer some incense.”

Receiving the words I had mixed lies into, she made another constrained smile.

“It’s all right, since there’s no one else around right now. I’m sure Sakura would be delighted too.”

I wondered just where that delighted girl was, but of course, I didn’t say that aloud.

I took off my shoes and walked deeper into the house like I had been prompted. It may have just been my imagination, but the inside of the house looked wider than during my last visit, making it feel just a little colder.

I was led into the living room I hadn’t entered the previous time.

“I guess we should start with the prayer offering.”

I nodded, and her mom guided me into a tatami room that was connected to the living room. Though I could feel my heart and body tremble as I looked into the room, I somehow managed to stand firm, and with steps that I didn’t think looked unnatural, walked over to stand before a large wooden shelf with various items lined up on it.

Her mom kneeled down, took out a match from below the shelf, and lit a flame on the candle on top of a pedestal next to that thing for poking incense sticks in.

“Sakura, your friend is here.”

Her faint voice directed at the portrait on the shelf wasn’t conveyed anywhere - it reached only the vacant membrane that were my ears.

Having been prompted to do so, I sat in seiza on the floor cushion that had been placed there.

Whether I was ready to or not, I ended up coming face to face with the girl’s portrait.

Her smile in the photo; even now, I could almost hear her laughter, just as when she was still alive.

No good……

I turned my eyes away from the photo, rang a high pitched sound from an instrument I couldn't name, and brought my hands together.

But for some reason, I couldn't think of anything to say in my prayers.

After the prayer offering came to an end, I turned to face her mom who sat in seiza beside me. For now, I got off the floor cushion. She smiled a tired smile at me as I came to sit before her.

"This is something that I borrowed from Sakura-san. Would it be alright if I were to pass it to Auntie?"

"Something from that girl…… Hmm, wonder what could it be."

I retrieved 'The Little Prince' from inside my bag, and handed it over to her mom. With a look that said she recognised the paperback, her mom received it with a hug, and proceeded to place it beside the girl's portrait like an offering.

"……Thank you so very much for getting along with Sakura."

She respectfully lowered her head, leaving me at a loss.

"No, I'm the one that should be grateful, she really aided me when she was alive. She was always lively, and being together with her made me brighten up too."

"……That's true huh, she was lively."

Noticing the hesitation in her voice, it hit upon me that apart from me, nobody beyond her family knew about her pancreas.

Though I thought that I should have left it a secret, I realised I wouldn't be able to bring up my original goal if I continued doing so.

Truthfully, my conscience was telling me not to bring up this matter to her family after such a long period of time, but I ignored it and pushed on ahead.

"Excuse me…… But I have something I'd like to talk about."

"Hm, what could it be?"

Her mom made a gentle, sorrowful face. Once again, I struck down my conscience.

“The truth is…… I knew about her illness.”

“Huh……”

Her mom made a surprised face just like I had expected.

“I had heard about it from her. That is why, I could never even begin to imagine that something like this would have happened.”

Still surprised, her mom wordlessly brought both her hands to her mouth. Just as I thought, she hadn’t informed her family that she had told someone else about her illness. I figured that was probably the case. If I had to say why, it was because even though I had run into Best-Friend-san in that ward of hers countless times, I had absolutely never run into her family. Though if that had happened, I was the one that would’ve been troubled.

“The truth is, I had just happened to meet her in the hospital. It was at that time that I had heard about it from her. Though I still don’t understand why she decided to tell me.”

I presumed upon her silence as she listened to my words, and continued.

“She had kept it a secret from her classmates other than me. That is why, for bringing up something like this right now and surprising Auntie, I’m sorry.”

I broached the true motive behind my visit.

“Having come here today, the truth is that apart from offering my prayers, I have one other request. I’d like to take a look at the book she had carried around like a diary.”

“……”

“The ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’.”

Those words, were a trigger.

Her mom, Sakura Yamauchi’s mom - with her hands still covering her mouth, tears began streaming down her cheeks. Quietly, quietly, trying to suppress her voice, she cried.

I didn’t understand the meaning behind her tears. I could tell that they were likely born from sorrow, but as for which part of the truth that I knew about the girl’s illness had the effect of inducing further sorrow - I didn’t know. That was why, unable to offer any words of comfort, I waited silently.

Finally, while her tears had yet to dry, her mom looked intently at me, and slowly proceeded to talk about the reason for her tears.

“So it was you huh……”

What did she mean?

“I’m glad…… I’m glad…… That you came…… I’m really glad.”

I understood less and less of what she meant. At a loss for words, I merely watched on as her tears trickled down.

“Wait just a moment……”

Her mom stood up, and left for another part of the house. Having been left behind, I thought about the meaning behind her mom’s tears and words, but nothing came to mind.

And so, before I could figure out anything, her mom returned to the room. She carried a paperback that I recognised on sight.

“It’s this, right……”

While crying, her mom softly placed the paperback onto the floor, and turned it such that its front cover faced me. That was certainly the book she had carried wherever she went. It was the book which contents she had assiduously kept hidden, except for just one occasion.

“Yes, this is the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’. I’ve heard that it was something like a diary that she began keeping after she became ill. I’ve never seen its contents when she was alive, but I’ve heard from her herself to disclose it to everyone after her death. Regarding this matter, have you heard anything about it?”

Nodding, nodding, she wordlessly nodded her head countless times. Each time, tears would fall onto the tatami and her lightly-coloured skirt.

I properly lowered my head and made my request.

“Could I please, take a look at it?”

“…… Yes……. Of course, of course……”

“……Thank you very much.”

“This was something Sakura, thinking of you, left behind.”

My hands that were reaching out to the book came to a stop. Thought I didn’t mean to, my arms stopped on reflex, and I looked up at her mom’s face.

“…….Huh?”

With tears quickly staining her face, she began to speak.

“I heard about it…… From Sakura……. That girl wanted this diary…… To be passed to a certain person after she died…… To the one and only person…… Who knew about that girl’s illness……. She said that because…… That person knew about the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’……”

The tears that had stained her face melted into the air. I couldn’t do anything but listen. From the side, the smiling girl was watching us.

“Even though that person……. That person…… Was a coward…… And may not come for the funeral, that person would definitely come to retrieve this…… And until then…… She said not to let anyone outside of our family see it…… I remember, that girl’s words, clearly…… It really was, something from a while back……”

Perhaps having finally been overwhelmed by emotion, her mom began to cry, covering her face with both hands. I could only sit there, dumbfounded. This was different from what I had heard. This was something the girl had left, for me?

My memories of the girl surged through my brain.

Within the gaps between the tears, her mom’s voice leaked out.

“Thank you…… Thank you so much……. It’s thanks to you that…….. That girl…… That girl was…… ……With you……”

No longer able to bear it, I picked up the paperback that had been placed before me. No one stopped me from doing so.

I began from the first few pages - monologues from when she was a middle schooler.

“29th November 20XX

I don’t really want to write about dark things, but it wouldn’t do not to write down something like this, huh. It was when I learnt that I had contracted my illness. My head went completely blank, and not knowing what I should do, I got anxious and cried, got angry and took it out on my family, and I did various other things. First off, I’d like to apologise to my family. I’m sorry. For watching over me since then until I calmed down - thank you. ……”

“4th December 20XX

It’s gotten cold recently. But after learning that I was ill, I started thinking of various things. One of which, was my decision to not resent my own fate of becoming ill. That is why, I’m not naming this a disease-fighting, but a disease coexistence journal. ……”

Every few days, she would document the happenings of her everyday life. This carried on for a few years. But even with that said, her accounts during this period were all rather short. Since I thought that they weren’t really related to what I wanted to know, I decided to skim through them for now. Of course, there were accounts here and there that caught my attention.

“12th October 20XX

I got a new boyfriend. It’s an odd feeling. If I continue with him for longer, I’ll probably have to tell him about my illness. I don’t really want to though.”

“3rd January 20XX

We broke up. Something like breaking up within the first three days of the year - guess it might be a bad omen. I got comforted by Kyouko.”

“20th January 20XX

One day I’ll have to tell Kyouko about my illness too. But that can wait till the very last moment. Because I want to keep having fun with Kyouko. Just

in case Kyouko reads this, I'll apologise right here for keeping quiet. Sorry for not telling you that I'm dying."

After graduating from middle school, she entered high school, and together with Best-Friend-san, she enjoyed the joys of youth to the fullest. A year passed, and she became a second year; the everyday that she decided to live brightly even as she felt death coming that much closer, line by line, sunk itself deep within my guts.

"15th June 20XX

It seems like I've slowly become more like a high schooler. I was totally split on whether to join a club or not, but I decided not to enter one in the end. I even considered joining a few of the culture clubs, but in order to treasure the time I have with my family and friends, I chose the go-home club. Kyouko's the same as before, getting all sweaty everyday playing volleyball. Do your best, Kyouko!"

"12th March 20XX

It's often said that watching the sakura scatter would make one feel an ache in their heart, but watching them bloom makes my heart ache too. Because I'll end up estimating how many more times I'll get to see the sakura. However, there's an upside to that too. Surely, the sakura I see are more beautiful than the sakura anyone else in my generation sees. ……"

"5th April 20 XX

I've become a second year! I got to be in the same class as Kyouko!! I'm so glad!!

There are also others like Hina and Rina, and as for the boys, I'm also with Takahiro-kun. My luck's good huh. Well, if I think of it as all of the luck from my pancreas being brought over to this, I guess it's only appropriate. Speaking of which……"

And then, on a certain day in the middle of spring, she met me. We had known of each other from much earlier before, but that was the day that we met.

“22nd April 20XX

Today was the first time I’ve talked to someone about my illness. The other party was my classmate, ●●-kun. He happened to pick up this paperback at the hospital, and he even read it, so thinking “it doesn’t matter anymore!” I talked to him. Maybe I wanted someone to listen me too. Not to mention, ●●-kun doesn’t seem to have many friends, so I think that’s why he seemed to have left an impression inside my heart. The truth is that since before, I’ve been interested in ●●-kun. We were actually in the same class in first year, but I wonder if he remembers that? He’s always reading books after all - it’s as if he’s quietly fighting against himself. Besides that, having a go at talking with him today was amusing, and I got interested in him right away. Simple as that. ●●-kun gives off a slightly different vibe from other people. I want to get along better with him. He even knows my secret after all.”

My name had been blotted out with a ballpoint pen. Perhaps it was after I said that I didn’t want my name to appear that it was blotted out for me.

It was from this point on that our time began to overlap. The accounts were generally done every three days. Most of the content was trivial.

“23rd April 20XX

I’ve become part of the library committee. Nothing’s going to change even if I say it here, but just what kind of school system allows people to freely choose their own committees? I called out to ●●-kun and he made a troubled face. But it looks like he properly taught me about the roles of my job and such. I think I’ll be asking him about various things.”

“7th June 20XX

I got full points on a small test. As expected of me! Actually, doesn’t ‘expectedofme’ sort of look like the name of a flower? Recently my heart has been feeling light. Sometimes, when I make jokes about me dying, ●●-kun would frown, and he’d say interesting things! It’s just by a little, but I’m starting to understand his character. As I thought, he really is fighting against himself.”

“30th June 20XX

It’s hot. But it’s not like I hate the heat. Sweating makes me feel like I’m alive. We’re doing basketball for gym class. Apart from that, ●●-kun said not to include his name in the Disease Coexistence Journal. Though I imitated him and hit back with disobliging words, unlike him, I’m basically obedient, so I’ll humour his requests from time to time. From here on out, I’ll refrain from mentioning his name.”

It was just like I had thought. I proceeded reading, and my name really didn’t appear after this day. I also came to understand one more thing. It was probably because the contents became like this that her mom couldn’t identify who it was that knew about her illness. Thinking about her family’s concerns, I thought that perhaps I had said something unnecessary. Reading on, those thoughts of mine only grew stronger.

"8th July 20XX

Today, I received advice that I should use my time to do I want to do. When I thought "hmm what do I want to do…”, I decided that I wanted to go out and have fun with the person that gave me advice, and that I wanted to eat some yakiniku, so we promised to do that on Sunday. ……“

"11th July 20XX

The yakiniku was delicious! And I enjoyed today too. It’s regrettable that I can’t write about it in detail. The one thing I’ll say is that, I’m thinking of hammering in the deliciousness of horumon into others until I die. After that.……”

“12th July 20XX

Today, I hastily made plans to, and went to eat dessert. It only occurred to me after my morning classes, so I had to come up with a way of dragging someone into those plans, and carry it out. Since I kept on thinking about it, I probably didn’t do very well in my tests.”

Just as my name had stopped appearing, accounts of what she had thought of me disappeared all at once too. It was a failure on my part.

Around this point of time, her accounts seemed to have become a daily thing.

"13th July 20XX

From today onwards, if I think of anything I want to do, I'll write it down in here.

□I want to go on a trip (with a boy)

□I want to eat delicious horumon

□I want to eat delicious ramen

I thought of some good things."

"15th July 20XX

□I want to do something that shouldn't be done with a boy that isn't my lover (lol)

I'll write about my trip after I reach home."

"20th July 20XX

My test results were better than I thought! I enjoyed my trip, and was forgiven by Kyouko too - it seems like I'm going to start summer vacation feeling pretty good. Or so I thought, but there'll still be supplementary lessons. Darn it."

"21st July 20XX

"It was a very bad, and very good day. Just a little bit, I cried alone. Today was full of crying."

……It must have been about that day. That day when we both made mistakes. The part about her crying alone brought an unexpected pain into the area around my lungs.

"22nd July 20XX

I’m in the hospital. I’m going to be hospitalised for around two weeks. Something about how the numbers were weird. Just a little - no, I’ll stop lying here. I’m quite worried. But even so, I’m putting on airs to those around me. I’m not lying though. I’m just putting on airs.”

"24th July 20XX

Thinking of blowing my uneasiness away, I was dancing, but I got caught in the act. I was embarrassed, but also relieved that I was visited. Tears came out, and I desperately hid them. After that, time passed by enjoyably. My heart has become lighter. ……”

“27th July 20XX

Something interesting happened, but I can’t write about it because of a rule. So I guess I’ll write about magic tricks. ……”

“28th July 20XX

My remaining life expectancy has been cut in half.”

Reading the characters that had been lined-up, I was left speechless.

“31st July 20XX

I told a lie. I guess this isn’t the first time. I plainly told a lie. I was asked if something had happened, and I almost ended up crying. I almost ended up talking about everything. But I thought that was no good, so I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to let go of the everyday that had been given to me. I’m weak. I’ll reveal the truth, one day.”

“3rd August 20XX

I got worried about. And I told a lie again. After all, if someone makes such a relieved face, you can’t tell them the truth. But, it made me happy. Enough to make me wonder if it was possible to have something in life that

made me this happy. Because I didn't know I was this needed. I was so happy, so happy, that I ended up crying once I was alone. Even though I'm writing about it like this, I want to leave my true feelings to be found out after I die too - as I thought, I'm weak. I wasn't seen through, I think. I'm, unexpectedly good at putting up a poker face."

"4th August 20XX

Seems like the me from just recently has been too weak! I'm going to stop writing dark things now! I forgot about how I decided to always keep facing forward! Maybe I'll even erase the past few days' records later."

"7th August 20XX

The truth is that ever since I've been hospitalised, as much as I could, I'd try to have two certain people run into each other, in the hopes that they'd start to get along, but it seems like that's quite difficult (lol). I'll keep wishing until I die that the two of them will get along. Recently I've been practising a grand magic trick! I can't wait to showcase it. ……"

"10th August 20XX

My plans after getting discharged have been decided. I'm going to the beach. Starting off with something like that seems just about right, I think. It feels like the recent us, without pacing down, have been going as far as we can (lol). That's fine too, but it'd be nice we could take it slow y'know. The magic trick is difficult. ……"

"13th August 20XX

I got a visit, and I ate my first watermelon this summer. I like watermelon more than melon. I guess a person's likes don't really change from when they're a child, huh. But even with that said, it's not like I'll always love horumon. I really can't stand it when children chew noisily on mino (lol). I've explained the rules of this book to my mom. So I'll write it down once more. Until a certain person comes to retrieve this book, it absolutely cannot be shown to anyone outside of our family. Don't go asking Kyouko or anyone else for a hint either. ……"

"16th August 20XX

I'm going to be discharged soon! Two people came to give me one last hospital visit. Since I've received notice from both sides to cut it out, I decided to stagger their visiting timings for them (lol), but even once is fine so, I'd like the three of us to get along and eat a meal together!"

“18th August 20XX

I’m going to be discharged tomorrooooooooow! I’m going to enjoy my remaining time to the fullest! Yaaaaaaaaaaay!”

Her entries came to an end there.

Just how should I put it?

My concerns had been justified.

Even though something had happened, she had covered it up.

Just like from sometime before, something was rising up from within my guts. Calm down, I soothed myself. I couldn’t have done anything, and nothing could be done about it now - I made excuses, desperately trying to maintain myself.

While breathing deeply, I thought of what I should’ve been thinking of right now.

I hadn’t found what I wished to find inside the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’. There was no clear answer as to what she had thought of me inside this book. I understood that I was thought of as important, but that was something I already knew. The manner in which she called me still eluded me.

I was, more than a little bit disappointed.

I closed my eyes and steadied my breathing. For the time being, I became as silent as though in prayer.

I closed the book, and looked back up to her mom who had been patiently waiting for me. I quietly placed the book on the floor, and pushed it forward.

“Thank you very much……”

“…….Not yet.”

Her mom didn't take back the 'Disease Coexistence Journal'. Her eyes that looked exactly like the girl's were bright red. And they looked firmly into mine.

"What Sakura really wanted you to read is surely, further ahead still."

Having been told as such, I flipped through the still blank pages in a fluster.

The accounts began once again at the end of the paperback.

There were her words, bursting forth with personality, high-spirited.

I thought that my heart was going to stop.

"Will (Draft) (To be rewritten many times over)

Greetings, everyone.

This is my will.

If this enters anyone's eyes, I'll probably no longer be in this world huh. (Maybe this is too conventional?)

Firstly, for keeping silent about my disease from almost everyone, please forgive me. I'm really sorry.

Even though it was selfish of me, I wanted to live normally, have a lot of fun, and laugh a lot with everyone. That is why I died, remaining silent about it.

Perhaps there may even be some people who were thinking of telling me something. If you are one of them. Please tell everybody else everything that you want to tell them. Whether you like them or hate them, everything like that - I want you to tell them. Otherwise, they might die before you know it, just like I have. Though you may no longer be able to make it in time for me, you can still make it in time for others, so please tell them what you want to.

To everyone in school (maybe I should write individually to some people?), I really enjoyed studying together with everyone. While I seriously enjoyed the cultural festival and athletic festival too, what I especially enjoyed was living an everyday life together with everyone. It's frustrating that I'm

unable to see everyone enjoy yourselves doing various things in the various places that you'll go to from now on. So please, make many more memories to reminisce about, and tell me about them in heaven. That's why, everyone better not do any bad things (lol). To the people that loved me, to the people that hated me - thank you.

Dad, Mom, Big Bro (would this count as writing individually?), for everything up till now, thank you so much. I really loved our family. Dad, Mom, and Big Bro too, I really, really loved you all. When I was still little, the four of us would go on trips pretty often, right? Even now, I still remember them pretty well. Though I've been very rowdy and have only caused problems since I was young, I wonder if I've become a daughter to be proud of. Even in heaven, I want to be dad and mom's child. Even if I'm reborn, I want to be a daughter to the both of you. That's why, let's get along forever. And when I'm reborn, I'll be raised by the two of you again. Together with Big Bro, I want to live as a Yamauchi again. Hmm, there's too much that I want to write, I can't get them all down huh.

(Like I thought, I'll write individually to my precious partner. I'll rewrite the part for my family again.)

Kyouko.

Let me say this first. I love you.

I love Kyouko. Without a single doubt, I love you. That's why, I'm really sorry.

For informing you at the very last moment, I'm sorry. (I have to properly think about this too)

Forgive me - I won't say something like that.

But, believe just this. I loved you.

And because I loved you, I couldn't tell you.

I loved being with Kyouko. Laughing, getting angry, saying foolish things, crying - I loved all of it.

I’m sorry, that’s wrong.

Even now, I love it.

Always. In present progressive tense, I love it. Even when I go to heaven, even when I’m reborn, I’ll always continue to love it.

I love the time I spent with you whom I love, and I don’t have the courage to break it.

It’s a little mean to my other friends, but Kyouko will always be my number one. Perhaps I’ve even fallen in love with Kyouko. Alright, then, in our next lives, Kyouko should go become a boy (lol).

Be happy alright. Kyouko.

No matter what happens, it’ll be fine if it’s you, Kyouko. After all, the Kyouko whom I love won’t lose, right?

Find a wonderful husband, and give birth to a cute baby. Make a family that’s happier than anyone else’s.

Truth be told, I wanted to see it you know. Kyouko’s home. ○ (←I won’t cry when I write the real thing)

I’ll always watch over Kyouko from heaven.

That’s right, I have just one request. I’ll be happy if you think of it as my final request and listen to me.

My request is that I have a person I want you to get along with.

Yes, it’s the boy you’re always glaring at (lol).

That boy is a good person y’know. Really. Though he’s mean to me sometimes (lol).

However, he’s

(I guess it’s fine to leave the explanation about him for a later time)

(I need to better convey the things I want to tell Kyouko)

Well, last off, is you.

I won’t write your name (lol).

You, I’m referring to you. Since you said not to write it down y'know.

Well, ya doin’ fine? (lol)

In various ways, the number of things that I especially want to say have increased recently. (The summer of second year)

But first, the administrative matters.

Please use this ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ freely. I’ve already informed my family about it. To hand this over to you when you come to retrieve it.

What ‘freely’ means, is that you can do whatever you want with this thing that you’ve received.

You can tear it up, you can hide it, and you can give it to anyone.

In other words, though I’ve written messages for various people, whether they are shown to everyone is all up to you.

Because right now, at this moment you are looking at this, this ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ has become yours. If you don’t want it, feel free to throw it away (angry).

This is the very least I can do for you, who has given me various things.

The watermelon from the other day was delicious (lol). (The perspective has somehow shifted to the present - maybe I should just rewrite it)

Okay, so I’m going to write down what I want to tell you now alright. These are my true feelings, I think. If my feelings change, I’ll rewrite this. But if I start to hate you, I won’t write anything at all (lol). If that time comes, wouldn’t it be better if you just go and get killed by Kyouko? (lol)

Since that time, that time we met at the hospital, not more than four months have passed huh. It’s strange. I feel like I’ve spent much, much more time

with you. Surely, it’s because you’ve taught me so many things that it was so fulfilling.

Though I’ve written it down in an entry too, the truth is that I’ve been interested in you since so much earlier than that. Do you know why? It’s something you say pretty often y'know.

The right answer is, because I thought of it too.

That you and I are surely opposite kinds of humans.

I thought of it too.

Thinking like that, I became interested, but I never got the opportunity to start getting along with you, and that was when that coincidence happened, y’know? So I ended up thinking, ‘Guess I’ve got no choice but to get along with him now huh.’ For having started to get along in the end, I’m glad, really glad.

Though recently, I’ve been hearing voices here and there, like, aren’t they getting along too well? (lol) Is this, playing lovers? So I gave it such a name on my own, but that really gets my heart pumping. Even though we’re only at hugs right now y’know. It’s like, at this rate, aren’t we going to end up kissing for fun? And my heart starts pumping (lol).

Hmm, well that’s fine too though. Do you think that’s a bombshell remark? But really, that’s fine too. Even if we don’t become lovers, I’m still glad.

I was a little troubled, but someday, when you read this, I’ll be dead after all (lol). So I’ll be straightforward.

To put it straightforwardly, I’ve thought countless times, truly countless times, that I was in love with you. For example, that time, when you talked about your first love. There was a fluttering in my chest y’know. That time when we drank liqueur in the hotel room was the same. The first time I hugged you was the same.

But, you know, I didn’t feel like becoming lovers with you, and even in the future, I won’t start to feel so. That’s what I think, probably (lol).

Perhaps, we might even do well as lovers. But the time to ascertain that is something we don’t have, right?

And not to mention, I’d hate to call our relationship commonplace names like that.

Something like love, or friendship. Our relationship isn't like that, right? Though I am a little curious about how it would happen if you were to fall in love with me. But I don't have the intention or the means to ask.

Ah, incidentally, since it's related to this matter, I'll tell you the question I was thinking of asking that time in the hospital, when I said I wanted to play Truth or Dare. Since I won't know the answer, I'm not violating the rules alright. What I wanted to ask, you see-

Was, 'Why, won't you call me by my name?'

I remember it. When I was asleep in the Shinkansen, you woke me up by shooting me with a rubber band, didn't you? Even though you could've just called me awake, you didn't call my name. It's been on my mind ever since then. And you really haven't called my name even once. It's always, 'You'. You, you, you.

At that time, the reason I was at a loss as to whether to ask you about it, was because I thought that, just maybe, you didn't call my name because you hated me. I was thinking in that manner. Moreover, I couldn't think something like that didn't matter. Because I pretty much have no confidence. Since, unlike you, I was a human whose concept of 'self' could exist only relative to the people around me.

Because I believed that, I thought that I couldn't ask without relying on Truth or Dare, but recently, I've realised that I was mistaken.

Everything from here onwards is my own imagination. Forgive me if I'm mistaken alright.

Aren't you just afraid of making me someone to you?

You've said it before, right? That it's an interest of yours to imagine what the humans around you think of you when they call your name. And that having imagined so, it didn't matter if you were right of wrong.

This is just a convenient and selfish interpretation of mine but, you probably don't think that I don't matter.

And so, I imagine that you're afraid to do so.

You're afraid of attaching meaning to it when you call my name.

You’re afraid of making me, who you’re going to lose sooner or later, a ‘friend’ or a ‘lover’.

So what do you think? If I hit the bull’s eye, leave some plum liqueur or something in front of my grave (lol).

It’s fine not to be afraid though. No matter what happens, people should be able to get along well with other people you know. Just like me and you till now.

Ah, I keep writing about how you’re afraid, like I’m blaming you for being a coward, but that’s not the case.

Because I think that you’re an amazing human, y’know.

An amazing person that’s the complete opposite of me.

Even more incidentally, I’ll even answer that question you asked before. What a huge service, huh!

That one about what I thought of you. You don’t particularly want to know? (lol) Then it’s fine even if you skip reading this part.

You see, I-

I admire you.

For a while now, there’s something that I’ve kept on thinking about.

That if I were like you, I’d be able to live only for myself, with an appeal that was mine alone, responsible for myself, without bothering anyone else, without spreading sadness to you or my family.

Of course, I am most happy with my life right now. But, I admire you. You, who will simply live as a human all alone, even without anyone around.

The premise for my life is that somebody is always around.

I noticed it one day.

That my appeal couldn’t be established without anyone around me.

Though I don’t think that it’s a bad thing either. I mean, isn’t everyone like that? People are defined by their involvement with others after all. Even our

classmates wouldn’t be able to maintain their selves without being together with their friends or lovers.

Getting compared with someone, comparing ourselves, and having our selves found for the first time.

That is, “what living means to me”.

But you, only you, are always you yourself.

You created your own appeal, not through involvement with people, but by staring at yourself.

I wanted to have an appeal that was mine alone too.

That was why, on that day, after you went home, I cried.

It was that day you seriously show concerned for me. It was that day you told me you wanted me to live.

Without needing a relationship such as that of friends or lovers, I was chosen by you.

Not someone else. I, was chosen.

For the first time, I learnt that I, as me myself, was needed.

For the first time, I thought that I, and only I, was me myself.

Thank you.

Perhaps, for 17 years, I have been waiting to be needed by you.

Just like how the sakura wait for spring.

Maybe it’s because I understood that, that I chose this ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ as a recording method even though I didn’t read books.

Through my own choices, I met you.

Seriously y’know, for being able to make someone this happy, you’re reaaally an amazing human. If only everyone would notice your appeal too.

Since I’ve already noticed your appeal ages ago you know.

Before I die, I really want to brew the dirt under your nails or something and drink it.

So I've written, but it's only after doing so that I realised it.

Such commonplace words are no good, huh. The relationship between me and you - it'd be a waste to express it with words like that that can be found anywhere.

That's right huh, you may not like it, but y'know.

As I thought, I-

I want to eat your pancreas.

(Your part ended up being the longest - seems like it'll make Kyouko mad so I'll revise it)

Draft 1"

"……"

Having finished reading, I noticed that she didn't exist in this world I had returned to, and I understood.

Breaking. Aah, I was breaking.

I became conscious of it. I became conscious that stopping it was impossible.

Before that happened, there was something that I had to ask.

"Her……. Sakura-san's, cellphone."

"Cellphone……?"

Her mom stood up, and came back right away, carrying a single cellphone.

"Ever since that girl…… Left, I've tried receiving only the phone calls, but recently I cut the power too."

"Please…… Let me take a look at it."

Wordlessly, her mom held out the cellphone to me.

I opened that appliance which had a clamshell mechanism, and turned on the power. After a little wait, I started up the message folder and opened the inbox.

Amongst plenty of unread messages, I found it.

The final words I had sent.

The final message I had for her.

The message had been opened.

It had…… Reached……

I placed the cellphone and 'Disease Coexistence Journal' on the tatami, and somehow moved my quivering lips, to mouth my final words before I fully broke down.

"Aun, tie……"

"……Yes?"

"I'm really sorry…… I understand, that it may be inappropriate, to ask this of you……. But…… I'm really sorry……"

"……"

"……Is it alright, if I cry, already?"

After a single tear streamed down her own face, she nodded, once, and gave me her permission.

I, broke down. No, the truth is that I'd broken down long ago.

"Aaaaaaaaaaah! Waa-aaaaaaaaaah! Aaaaaaah, ngh, aaaaa-aaaaaaaaaaah–aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa aaaaahh! Hck, gh, aaaaaaaaa-aaa-"

I cried. Unabashedly, I wept like an infant. While alternating between rubbing my forehead against the tatami and looking up at the ceiling, in a loud voice, I cried. It was the first time. Crying with a loud voice, and crying in front of another person too. Because I didn’t want to do that sort of thing. Because I didn’t want to do something that would force my sorrow onto another person. I’d never done so before this. But right now, the surge of numerous emotions couldn’t allow me to remain self-absorbed.

Because I was happy.

That it had reached her, that it had made it through.

That she, had needed me.

That I, had been of help to her.

I was happy.

But at the same time, I was in unimaginable pain.

Her voice wouldn’t stop echoing.

Her faces surfaced one by one.

Crying, then frowning, then smiling, then smiling, then smiling.

Her touch.

And scent.

That sickly sweet scent.

As if it were right there, as if she were right there - I remembered.

But, she was no longer here. The girl was no longer here. Or anywhere. The girl I had always been looking at, was no longer here.

We went in different directions, so she often said.

It was only natural.

We, weren’t looking in the same direction.

Always, we had been looking at each other.

From opposite sides, we had always been looking at the other bank.

Even though it really should never have been discovered, even though it really should have never been noticed. We had been looking at each other. From different places, from unrelated places, where we should have existed separately.

And yet, we met, because she had come jumping over the channel.

But even so, I had thought that it was only me. Needing her, or thinking that I wanted to be like her.

To think, that this sort of me was-

That this sort of me was…… By her……

It was me.

It was me that, right now, was convinced.

I had been living in order to meet her.

I had made the choice. In order to meet her, and only for that, I made the choice, and lived.

There was no doubt.

After all, up till now, I had not known a single thing that was this happy, or this painful.

I lived.

Thanks to her, I lived these past four months.

Surely, for the first time as a person.

Through having my heart connected with hers.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Even though I couldn’t say enough of my thanks, the girl I should be saying it to wasn’t here.

No matter how much I cried, I could no longer reach her.

No matter how much I screamed, I could no longer reach her.

Even though I wanted to convey them to her this much - happy things, and painful things.

That the days I spent with her were the most fun I have ever had.

That I wanted to be with her more.

That I wanted to always be with her.

Even if it was impossible, I should have just told her.

Even if it was only self-satisfaction, I should have just had her hear me out.

It was regrettable.

I could no longer tell her anything.

I could no longer do anything for her.

Even though I had received this many things from her.

I, couldn’t do anything……

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I cried. And cried, and cried.

And finally.

When I stopped crying - not intentionally, but because I had no tears left in me - her mom was still seated before me, waiting.

I raised my head, and her mom held out a pale blue handkerchief. Timidly, I received the handkerchief, and still out of breath, I wiped away my tears.

“You can keep it. That’s Sakura’s handkerchief. If you held on to it, I’m sure that girl would be happy too.”

“……Thank you ……Very much.”

I honestly expressed my gratitude, wiped my eyes and nose and mouth, and stowed the handkerchief in a pocket on my uniform.

I once more assumed the proper posture on the tatami. My eyes were now as red as those of her mom.

“Please excuse me…… For losing my composure……”

Her mom promptly shook her head.

“It’s alright, it’s only normal for children to cry. That girl also used to cry quite a lot. Because she’s always been a crybaby. But you know, around the time she met you, and began writing about the time she spent with you, that girl stopped crying. Not completely though. But still, thank you. Thanks to you, the time she got to live became precious to her.”

I held back the tears that threatened to flow again, and I shook my head.

“The one that received her precious time was me.”

“……If that’s the case, you should come have a meal with our family sometime. That girl didn’t tell us about anything involving you after all.”

Facing her mom’s sorrowful smile, I wavered once more.

Giving in to my wavering self, I spoke to her mom a little about the memories that I'd shared with the girl. The things that hadn't been written down in her diary - of course, our game of Truth or Dare, and how we slept on a bed together - I left out. Her mom gave me her undivided attention, nodding countlessly.

Talking about my memories of her made it feel as if my heart was getting lighter, little by little.

The happiness and sorrow that were precious to me remained as they were, but it felt like I was casting off unnecessary weight.

That was why I thought that it was for my sake that her mom was listening to me.

At the end of my story, I made a request to her mom.

"Could I someday come offer my prayers again?"

"Yes, of course. When that time comes, please come and meet my husband and son too. That's right, together with Kyouko-chan…… Though it looks like you two don't really get along."

Exactly like the girl, her mom giggled.

"That appears to be the case, huh. Various things happened, and I came to be hated."

"It's not like I'm forcing it, but if possible, Kyouko-chan and you should come join our family for a meal someday. It's out of gratitude too, but being able to get along too with the two people Sakura treasured would make Auntie happy."

"That probably depends more on what she thinks than I do, but I'll keep that in mind."

After that, we exchanged a few words, and after I promised to come visit on a later date, I stood up. At her firm insistence, I was made to bring the 'Disease Coexistence Journal' home. The ten thousand yen my mother had made me bring had been declined.

Her mom saw me out to the entrance. I put on my shoes, said my thanks once more, and just when I put my hand on the door knob, I was called out to.

“That’s right, what was your first name?”

In response to her casual question, I properly turned around, and answered.

“It’s Haruki. My name is Haruki Shiga.”

“Ah, wasn’t there a novelist with that name?”

Once my surprise faded, I felt a smile creep across my mouth.

“Yes, though I don’t know which you may be referring to.”

I once again said my thanks, bade my farewell, and left the front door of the Yamauchi house.

The rain had stopped.

After dinner, I confined myself to my room, and while reading the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ once more, I began to think. For a third time, I ended up crying in the midst of reading, but I continued to think still.

What should I do from now on? I thought about what I could do for her sake, for her family’s sake, and for my own sake.

I, who had received the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’, thought about what I was able to do.

After much thought, I made my decision a little past 9 PM, and began taking action.

I retrieved a printout that I had left in my desk drawer, and took out my cellphone.

Looking at the printout, I dialled a number I’d never thought I would use in my life.

That night, I dreamt that I was talking with her, and I cried again.

I arrived at the designated café after noon.

Since I had arrived a little earlier than the appointed time, the other party had yet to show. I asked for an iced coffee and sat down on a vacant chair by the window.

I was able to come to the designated café without any hesitation. It was probably a coincidence, but it was the same place I had waited for her on that day, the day she died.

No, it might not have been a coincidence. I reconsidered while drinking my iced coffee. Surely, she must have been a regular here.

Just like on that day, I looked outside. Just like on that day, people holding onto different lives were passing by.

But unlike that day, the person I was supposed to meet properly arrived on time. I was glad. I was relieved. Besides the trauma from that time, I was also worried that I could have been stood up.

Wordlessly, Kyouko-san sat down on the chair at the other end, and at once glared at me with eyes that had become bright red.

“So I’ve come…… But……. What?”

I refused to be intimidated. Forcibly hardening my trembling heart, I met her gaze, and began opening my mouth.

However, I was cut off by Kyouko-san.

“Sakura’s funeral……. You…… Didn’t go.”

“…….”

“…….Why?”

“That’s…….”

Just as I found myself unable to answer, a loud sound reverberated throughout the store, and time within it stopped momentarily. It was the sound of Kyouko-san striking the table with her fist.

“…….Sorry……”

Just as time began moving inside the store, Kyouko-san lowered her eyes, and said so in a soft voice.

Once again, I opened my mouth to speak.

“Thank you for coming. This, must be the first time we’re properly speaking to each other.”

“……”

“I have a matter to speak to you about, Kyouko-san, so I had you come here but, first, I wonder where I should start.”

“Just get to the point.”

“……That’s right, sorry. I have something I want Kyouko-san to see.”

“……”

Of course, the matter was about the girl. She alone was the only point of contact between me and Kyouko-san. After troubling over it yesterday, I had decided to speak with Kyouko-san.

Before I arrived, I had been thinking about how to broach the subject with Kyouko-san - whether to start with the relationship between me and the girl, or about the illness. In the end, I decided to simply let Kyouko-san see the truth first.

I took the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ out from my bag, and placed it on the table.

“This is, the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’.”

“……Disease coexistence?”

I removed the dust jacket wrapped around the book, and showed it to her.

Right away, Kyouko-san’s eyes, her eyes that were hollow somewhere, opened wide. I thought that it was to be expected of her. I thought that it was enviable too.

“……That’s……Sakura’s handwriting.”

“It is.”

With a distinct movement, I nodded.

“This was her book. As part of her will, I received it.”

“……Her will……”

The matter I was about to speak of made both my heart and words excruciatingly heavy. But, I couldn’t let that stop me.

“The things written inside, are all real. They are neither part of her mischief, nor mine. This is, something like a diary she had written, and in its last pages, is a will addressed to Kyouko-san and me, among others.”

“……What……are you saying?”

“She, was ill.”

“……You’re, lying, I’ve never heard of anything like that.”

“She didn’t tell you.”

“……And just why would you know something that even I don’t?”

That was what I had thought too. But I knew the reason for that now.

“She didn’t tell anyone other than me. She, had gotten wrapped up in an incident and passed away, but even if she hadn’t met with an incident, the truth is––”

My words were cut off once more before I could finish. In their stead, a high-pitched sound pierced into my ear, and pain soon began to seep into my left cheek. Since I didn’t have any experience, it took a while for me to realise that the pain had come from the violent act of a slap.

With eyes that looked as if they were about to cry, Kyouko-san spoke like she were pleading.

“Just stop……”

“I won’t stop. I have to tell Kyouko-san. She even wrote inside this book. That she treasured Kyouko-san the most. That’s why I want you to listen. She, was ill. Even if she hadn’t met with that incident, it had been determined that she would die after half a year. It’s not a lie.”

Kyouko-san weakly shook her head.

I held the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ out to Kyouko-san.

“Read it. That girl loved mischief, but, she absolutely wouldn’t make any jokes that would hurt you.”

Beyond that, I decided not to say anything more.

My worry that, just perhaps, she wouldn’t even read it, promptly dissolved when Kyouko-san reached her hand out after a short while.

Cautiously, Kyouko-san grabbed hold of the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ and opened its pages.

“It really is, Sakura’s handwriting……”

“This is genuinely, something that she wrote.”

Kyouko-san, with her eyebrows still knitted, began slowly reading from the very first page. I, focused on waiting.

I had heard from the girl that had died. Kyouko-san too wasn’t the type of person to ordinarily read words in a printed format. So it took some time for Kyouko-san to progress through the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’. Of course, her speed of reading the book wasn’t the only factor influencing how much time was passing.

At first, with a look that said she couldn’t bring herself to believe it, Kyouko-san re-read the pages countless, countless times. “It’s a lie, it’s a lie,” she even recited. Following which, her heart probably connected with the girl’s somewhere. As if a switch had been flipped, she started to cry, and her speed of reading gradually grew even slower.

I didn’t start to feel impatient at all. Especially when Kyouko-san began to cry, I felt relieved that she had come to accept it. Because if she hadn’t accepted it, my being here today would have lost its meaning. Both conveying the girl’s will, as well as one other purpose.

Midway, I ordered my second glass of coffee. After some thought, I got a glass of orange juice for Kyouko-san too. Without saying anything, Kyouko-san drank just a sip.

While waiting, I didn’t think about the girl. Rather, I was thinking about what I could do with what I had received from her. It was a difficult task for me who had persisted with self-absorption till now. I continued thinking, and time passed right by.

By the time I realised it, the day was turning into night. In the end, I couldn't think of anything concrete beyond what I had thought of yesterday. Things that people could normally do were difficult to me.

I looked at Kyouko-san; her face was sticky with tears and the pile of soggy tissues on the table had grown ever larger. Her fingers were sandwiched around right in the middle of the book, and she was about to close the book. I did the same thing the girl's mom had done yesterday. "There's, still more further ahead."

Though Kyouko-san already looked like she was tired from crying, once she read the portion consisting of the girl's will, this time she closed the book completely, and as if she weren't aware of the other people around her, she started bawling loudly. I, watched over Kyouko-san. Just like the girl's mom did for me yesterday, the entire time. Kyouko-san cried her name, countless, countless times. "Sakura, Sakura," she continued to cry.

Kyouko-san continued to cry for even longer than I did yesterday, and when I looked at her, her eyes - still overflowing with tears - turned towards me. It was the same as always, a gaze like she couldn't stand the very sight of me.

"……Why……"

Kyouko-san spoke with a voice that rattled in hoarseness.

"Why…… Didn't she…… Tell me……"

"……That's, because she-"

"It's not Sakura! It's you!"

Towards that angry voice that I hadn't even anticipated, I lost the words I had wanted to respond with. With a gaze like she wanted to stab me to death, and had become all miry, Kyouko-san let loose her words.

"If she, if she had told me…… I would've spent so much…… So much, so much more time with her. I would've quit my club too, I would've even quit school! And be together, with Sakura……"

It was, about this, huh.

"……I won't forgive you. No matter how much Sakura liked you, treasured you, needed you - I, won't forgive you."

She, lowered her face again, and her tears began to fall onto the floor. Just a little, really just a little, I - the same me I was up till now - ended up thinking that even so, I wouldn't mind. That even if I was hated, I wouldn't mind. But I shook my head. No good. That'd be no good.

I began speaking to Kyouko-san, whose mind had been made up and whose head was hanging low.

"I'm sorry, but…… Even little by little is fine so, I'd like you to forgive me."

Kyouko-san didn't say anything. I pushed aside my nervousness, and somehow re-opened my mouth.

"And then…… If you don't mind…… Someday…… I'd like-"

Kyouko-san, wasn't looking at me.

"I'd like for you to be my friend."

Because I used words that I had not once used in my life, both my throat and heart tensed up. I desperately worked to maintain my breathing. Because my own matters had left me desperate, I couldn't afford to do something like make a guess at Kyouko-san's mental state.

"……"

"It's not just because of her will. This is something I myself am choosing to do. I'd like to get along, with Kyouko-san. I want, us to get along."

"……"

"Is it, no good……"

I didn't know any other means of asking beyond this. And so I turned quiet. Silence fell into the space between the two of us.

I had never been this nervous about someone's answer before. With an extreme mental state in addition to such self-centeredness, I waited for a response from Kyouko-san, and after a while, still facing downwards, she shook her head several times, stood up for the first time in a few hours, and left without a glance in my direction.

Looking at Kyouko-san's back, this time it was my turn to hang my head low.

So it was…… No good huh……

I thought that this was probably the price I had to pay. The price for not acknowledging people up till now.

“This is, difficult.”

I whispered so, alone. But I think I was actually saying it to that girl.

I placed the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’ that had been left behind into my bag, and after clearing the mountain of trash the two of us had created, I once again headed outside where it had turned completely dark.

Just what should I do from now on? It felt like I had been trapped in a maze with no way out. If I were to look up, I could still see the sky. But even though I knew there was an exit, I couldn’t find it.

“What a troublesome problem,” I thought. Everyone who solved such problems on a daily basis was amazing.

I got on my bicycle, and starting riding home.

Summer vacation was about to end soon.

It seemed like it would be impossible to complete my homework before summer vacation came to an end.

10

I was hurried along by the cicadas, screeching like they still hadn’t had enough.

The day before marked the end of our supplementary lessons, and as summer vacation finally began in earnest, I found myself steadily climbing a flight of stone steps.

It was another especially hot day. I was mercilessly besieged by the scorching sun’s rays from above, as well as its reflection off the ground below. Already, my T-shirt had become drenched.

But I wasn’t really trying to repent for anything by putting myself through this ordeal.

“I’ve always thought this, but you’re pretty weak huh.”

So said the girl walking ahead of and laughing at me, who was dripping in sweat and short of breath. Indignant, I was thinking of making a rebuttal in my defence, but ultimately I decided to calm down for now, and pressed ahead desperately.

“Come on, you can do it, you can do it.”

With breath to spare, she cheered me on, clapping while making a face that I couldn’t tell if it was meant to encourage or provoke me.

Having reached the top at long last, I wiped off my sweat with a towel as I finally issued my rejoinder.

“I’m different from you, y'know.”

“Like how you’re a man? How embarrassing.”

“You see, I’m of noble birth, so it’s alright even if I don’t move my body.”

“Don’t insult those of noble birth.”

I retrieved my tea from my bag, and fiercely gulped down the PET bottle’s contents. Within that interval of time, she had already pushed on without

me. With no other choice, I followed after her, and soon arrived at a place with a pleasant view. From where we stood, an unobstructed panorama of our town stretched out below us.

“Feels greaaat!”

She had shouted aloud, arms stretched outwards. The scenery and breeze were certainly a delight. As I felt my sweat dry up in the wind, I drank my tea once more, reinvigorating my spirits.

“Alright, so it’s just a little more huh.”

“Oh? Well aren’t you lively all of a sudden. Let me give you this candy as a reward.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask, but do the two of you think that I live with candy or gum as my staple food or something?”

I spoke while remembering the face of a friend that would always, always offer me gum in our classroom.

“It can’t be helped y'know, I always just happen to have some in my pocket so, here.”

Reluctantly, I accepted the candy and placed it in my pocket. Just how many times would this make it?

She hummed a tune while keeping a brisk pace, leaving me behind as I trudged slowly after her. However, I got the feeling that this situation was like a display of the imbalance of power between us, so I forced myself upright and started to put some spring in my step.

Before I knew it, the dirt beneath our feet had become cobblestone, and we had arrived at our destination.

Among the many stone markers that were lined up, we searched for a single one.

“Ah, isn’t Haruki the one on water duty? Go get some from over there.”

“Can I just make two points? Firstly are there even any other duties? And secondly, wouldn’t it be fine if the two of us went together?”

“Keep your mouth shut and get going. Didn’t I already give you candy?”

Dismayed as I was to do her bidding, I kept quiet, put my belongings down and walked to a nearby water point, knowing that her personality would render any further objections useless. Several buckets and ladles had been left at the water point. Taking one of each, I twisted open the faucet, and let the bucket fill with water before returning to where she was waiting.

The girl stood gazing up at the sky.

“Hm, oh, good work, must’ve been hard on you.”

“If you think so then you should have helped.”

“You see, I’m of noble birth after all.”

“Alright alright, well then, be my guest.”

I handed the bucket and ladle over to her. She received them politely, and with all of her might, proceeded to douse the Yamauchi family grave before us. Some of the water splashed off the stone and onto my cheeks. The gravestone shimmered in the sunlight, creating a mystical sight.

“Come on, wake up, Sakuraaa!”

“I don’t think that’s how you’re supposed to do it. Definitely.”

I tried to calm the girl that had hurled water at the grave. But taking no heed of me, she flung all of the remaining water at the grave, working up a sweat as though she enjoyed it. It gave the mistakable impression that this was some sort of sport.

“Y'know, when putting our hands together before a grave, should we make a sound?”

“It’s probably done quietly in most cases, but wouldn’t it be better if we made some noise for her?”

Standing side by side, she and I each struck our own palms together once, letting our claps resonate. We closed our eyes, wishing that our prayers would properly reach her.

The two of us that got along - we sent her our thoughts.

We kept our own hands together for a long time, and after opening our eyes at almost the same time, she and I set down the various offerings we had each brought along.

“Well then, guess we should get going to Sakura’s house.”

“Guess so.”

“Since Auntie and I are gonna be giving you a stern lecture.”

“What’s with that? Not a single reason comes to mind though.”

“If you ask me, it’s more like I’m not even sure where to begin. That’s right, I guess first is how you’re a third year now, but you’re still pushing your luck and haven’t been studying at all huh.”

“It’s not something I need to tell you, but I’ve a good head on my shoulders so there’s no need for me to study.”

“That’s what I’m talking about!”

Her retort faded into the vast blue sky. My thoughts turned to the Yamauchi house that I hadn’t visited in some time. The last time I went there, I met her big brother for the first time, and was able to speak with him.

“Speaking of which, this is the first time I’m heading to that girl’s house together with somebody else.”

“And that’s the point you need to be lectured on the most about.”

While having an enjoyable but exceedingly meaningless exchange, this time, we returned the bucket and ladle together. Arriving before the grave once more, we said, “We’re heading to your house now alright,” and returned to the path from which we came. Returning down that path was a little bothersome, but even if we stayed on, we would only have continued our pleasant but fruitless back-and-forth, and that wouldn’t have been very productive.

Once again, just like when we were coming here, I trailed behind Kyouko-san as she went on ahead.

Bringing my hands together, I closed my eyes.

My feelings - I’ll turn them from something that’s mine alone, to something I can send to you.

I’d like you to forgive me. For the things I will think here.

For the things I will pray here.

Because I’m this sort of person, let me air my grievances first.

It wasn’t easy. As easy as you said it would be, as easy as you felt it would be.

Involving myself with people wasn’t easy you know.

It was hard, really.

That’s why it even took a year. Though some of the responsibility for this might lie with me.

But, I chose to, and have finally come all the way here. I’d like you to praise me for that.

One year ago, I made a choice. To become a human like you.

A human that acknowledged people. A human that loved people.

I’m not sure whether I’ve become accustomed to it, but at the very least, I chose to do so.

Right now, I, together with your best friend - the girl that became my first friend - are heading to your house.

Actually, it’d be great if the three of us could meet up, but since that’s not possible, it can’t be helped. Let’s just do that in heaven.

As for why the two of us are heading to a house you’re no longer in, we’re heading there to fulfil the promise I made to your mom that day.

Aren’t I late, you say? Kyouko-san said that to me too.

I’d like you to listen to my excuse. Because I’d always lived the life I did, I wasn’t sure what the standard was for someone to be called a friend.

And since I thought that it wouldn’t do if I didn’t go to your house with Kyouko-san as my friend-

I, who wasn’t sure, made the relationship between you and me the standard.

“I won’t forgive you” - ever since the day I was told that, one step at a time, truly one step at a time, we’ve been walking the path towards friendship. For waiting for me with great patience - despite her usual hastiness - on this path I was treading on with shaky feet for the first time, I have plenty of gratitude for Kyouko-san. As expected of your best friend. Of course, there’s no way I’d say that to the person herself.

And so, finally, during this period, I went on a day trip with Kyouko-san, though it was to that place we visited a year ago. That was when I told Kyouko-san for the first time about the promise that I had made to your mom. And then Kyouko-san got mad at me for not saying so earlier.

Honestly, that friend of mine really is quick-tempered.

The offerings we’ve brought are the souvenirs that we bought during that time.

It’s something that’s made where the God of Studies is, and its main ingredient is plum.

Even though you’re still only eighteen, I’ll overlook it just this once. The sample tasted great y’know.

It’d be good if it catches your fancy.

Kyouko-san is doing well. I wonder if you know.

I’m doing well too. So much better than even before I met you.

When you died, I thought of it. That I had lived in order to meet you.

However, I wasn’t able to believe that you had lived in order to be needed by me.

But that’s changed.

We must have lived in order for the two of us two exist together - that’s what I believe.

On our own, we were lacking.

That’s why, it was in order to compensate for each other that we had lived.

Recently, that’s how I’ve been thinking.

That’s why, having lost you, I have to be able to stand on my own.

I think, that is something I’m able to do for the two - and now one - of us.

……I’ll come again. I’m not sure about what happens to a person’s soul after death, so I’ll talk about the same things again at your house, in front of your photo or something. If it’s such that you’re unable to hear me, I’ll tell you when I go to heaven.

Well, see you soon.

Aah, that’s right, that’s right. There’s one lie I told you that didn’t get found out.

In the ‘Disease Coexistence Journal’, you revealed how you cried, what you thought about me, and the lies you told - so to be fair, I guess I’ll reveal some information too.

All right?

The story I told about the first person I fell for - that was a lie.

I told you, didn’t I? That story about the person who used ‘san’. That was an outright lie, a made-up story.

Since you got so moved by it, I wasn’t able to tell you.

Well, as for the truth. I’ll leave it for when I meet you again or something.

Maybe, if a girl like my true first love appears again-

Next time, it might be good to eat her pancreas.

We descended the white stone steps as they glistened under the unflinchingly cruel Sun-san.

In front of me, Kyouko-san slung her bag used for club activities over her shoulder, swinging it about as she hummed a tune.

I caught up to the side of my friend who was in a rather good mood, and correctly guessed the song she was humming.

Seemingly embarrassed, Kyouko-san forcefully hit me on the shoulder.

I raised my head to the sky as I laughed, and I ended up saying what had come to mind, just as it was.

“Let’s be happy.”

“…….What’s with that, are you confessing to me? On the way back from Sakura’s grave? How shocking.”

“Surely not. My words have greater meaning behind them. Besides, unlike that boy, I like girls that are more refined than you.”

Grinning, I - who shouldn’t have been forgiven - provoked the girl that had forgiven me.

Then, I realised right away that I shouldn’t have said those words just now. But it was already too late – what I’d said had raised a question mark within Kyouko-san, and she tilted her head to the side in suspicion.

“Unlike that boy?”

“Sorry, stop, wait, I take it back.”

She watched as I got uncharacteristically flustered, and thought for a little bit. Suddenly, she lifted both corners of her lips repulsively, and struck her hands together. Like thunder, it reverberated off the stone around us.

I shook my head and gave her a pleading look.

“Really, that just now, because of my carelessness, I was told many times over to keep it a secret……”

“If only Haruki had made more friends, maybe even I might not have figured it out y'kno~w. Well at any rate, heh, so it’s him huuuh. Hmmm, I thought he liked girls that were more refined.”

That’s what I’d thought too - after all, he himself had said so. Perhaps his preferences had changed, or maybe he was lying, but it didn’t matter which it was, in any case, I sincerely apologised to him inside my heart. Sorry, next time I’ll be the one to give you gum.

“Huuuh.” “Hmm.” Kyouko-san continued her murmuring, still grinning.

“Are you happy?”

“Hm, well, being liked by someone wouldn’t make you unhappy right.”

“Guess that’s good news.”

To the careless me as well.

“But I gueeess, dating is for after exams are over.”

“You’ve gotten rather ahead of yourself huh, guess I should tell him - wouldn’t it motivate him to study for the exams?”

We boisterously went at it as we descended the stairs.

Surely, she must have been watching us.

“Wahahah-”

With probably enough force to twist my neck, I turned back towards the laughter I had heard coming from behind. Kyouko-san too had made the same movement, and with an “ouch!”, she grabbed onto her neck.

Of course, there wasn’t anyone behind us.

The wind caressed our faces, wet as they were with sweat. Kyouko-san and I faced each other, and looked affirmatively into each other’s eyes before bursting into laughter at the same time.

“Well then, let’s get going to Sakura’s house!”

“Yeah, Sakura’s waiting after all.”

Roaring with laughter, we climbed down the long flight of stairs.

No longer, was I afraid.

Extra: Author's Preface for Taiwanese Readers

I think the slightly unsettling title “I Want to Eat Your Pancreas” is one of the reasons why all of you took notice of this book. Yes, even the author himself finds this book’s title slightly unsettling. But that all of you would be willing to pick up such a book, and even flip open its pages, has made me very glad. Thus, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude here, because this novel was written based on its title.

I personally like stories that are compelling and are of high entertainment value, and if such a story had a punchline, rather than just like it, I’d really love it. This time, the punchline that I’d set is the title “I Want to Eat Your Pancreas”. But just what sort of punchline is it? Please read on to find out.

To have a title that would attract both avid readers and non-readers alike, to write a story that would touch those who read it, and to create characters who would remain etched in the reader’s memory - those were my thoughts as I penned this novel.

The truth is that I’ve been wanting to go to Taiwan for the longest time, but having not gone up till now, I was in a complete shock when I found out that my work would become available to Taiwanese readers. And to think that my own creation would reach Taiwan before me, how enviable.

If I - in Japan - wrote something that could touch the hearts of all of you in Taiwan, then that would truly be great. Of course, I won’t arrogantly declare something like, “This book will definitely move everyone!” After all, our food, languages, and residences are all different, so perhaps even what we find interesting may differ too.

Even so, I still wish from the bottom of my heart, that no matter who reads them - if my stories can transcend the boundaries of nationality and culture, if all of you would think there’s a guy in Japan who writes rather interesting stories, then that would truly be great.

I look forward to forming such a connection with you who is reading this book.

Really, thank you all for your interest towards "I Want to Eat Your Pancreas".

Yoru Sumino

Credits

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidential.